

Jul-Aug 2015

Vol 5 Issue 4

64 Pages

Reading' Hour

short fiction

poetry

essays

reviews

Yellowstone

Sarah Rand

The Argumentative Indian

Manjushree Hegde

Laying Plans In The Wild

Nita Pavitran

Interview: Anuja Chauhan



Stories / Poetry:

Aman Chougale — Anitha Murthy — Aparajith Ramnath — Geetha Ravichandran — Lekha Nair — Manasa Komaravolu — Priyanjana Pramanik — Smitha Bhat — Somendra Singh Kharola — Sonali Gogate — Subhash Chandra

Bird of Paradise bloom
Photo: Sunil Parekh



Jul-Aug 2015
Vol 5 Issue 4
64 pages

Reading Hour

short fiction essays verse reviews

Editorial

"We lose ourselves in what we read, only to return to ourselves, transformed and part of a more expansive world." - Judith Butler

Indeed, after finishing a book, returning to the real world feels like being rudely shaken awake from a dream. And if it has been a particularly engaging book, one finds oneself slipping in and out of its parallel existence for several days after!

Reading is the ultimate escape and in today's time-is-money driven world, the ultimate indulgence. There are so many families that make a point of eating at least one meal together in the day... but we have a friend who insists, non-negotiably, that her family, including the children, sit and read together for at least half an hour everyday. A habit worth inculcating in any family!

The fiction section this time has been overrun by stories of marriages, save for the solitary tale about a jet-lagged parrot. Marriages with spilling secrets, marriages that almost aren't, marriages with bitter or sweet endings, marriages filled with threat or with love, marriages that make or break friendships.

Then we're carrying an interview with the very popular 'rom-com' author Anuja Chauhan, whose sequel to 'Those Pricey Thakur Girls' has been just released.

Among other articles, Sarah Rand describes a visit to Yellowstone National Park in the USA, a place that has almost as much seismic activity as California, and the highest density of thermal springs anywhere on earth. Closer home, Nita Pavitrnan describes one night spinning dreams with friends among the mountains in north-east India.

The ambiguous Indian nod is world-famous. But Manjushree Hegde would have it that the Indian is also known for being argumentative, and that since ancient times. She makes her point in an essay, *The Argumentative Indian*.

Thank you for picking up this issue, and yes, happy reading!

—Editors

readinghour.in
facebook.com/readinghour

Published, owned, & printed by Vaishali Khandekar. Printed at National Printing Press, 580, KR Garden, Koramangala, Bangalore-560095. Published at 177-B, Classic Orchards, Bannerghatta Rd, Bangalore-560076. Editor: Vaishali Khandekar. Editing Support: Arun Kumar, Manjushree Hegde. Subscriptions, business enquiries, feedback: readinghour@differsense.com / Ph: +91 80 26595745. Subscription Details: Print (within India only) / Electronic (PDF): Annual subscription Rs. 300/- (6 issues), 2 years Rs. 600/- (12 issues). Payment by cheque / DD in favour of 'Differences Ventures LLP' payable at Bangalore. Online subscription: readinghour.in. Submissions: editors@differsense.com Advertisers: Contact Arun Kumar at arunkumar@differsense.com / +91 98450 22991

Disclaimer: Matter published in Reading Hour magazine is the work of individual writers who guarantee it to be entirely their own, and original work. Contributions to Reading Hour are largely creative, while certain articles are the writer's own experiences or observations. The publishers accept no liability for them. Opinions expressed by our contributors do not necessarily represent the policies or positions of the publisher. The publishers intend no factual miscommunication, disrespect to, or incitement of any individual, community or enterprise through this publication.

Copyright ©2015-2016 Differences Ventures LLP. All rights reserved. Reproduction of any part of this issue in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher is prohibited.

CONTENTS

FICTION

- 3 | Awake Too Soon
Priyanjana Pramanik
- 7 | Flyway
Lekha Nair
- 11 | The Magic of Moolah
Subhash Chandra
- 20 | Sweet Lies
Anitha Murthy
- 29 | Tie-breaker
Aparajith Ramnath
- 45 | Lost Friend
Sonali Gogate
- 51 | The Horrific Tale Of The Jet-lagged Parrot
Smitha Bhat

POETRY

- 6 | Neither A Bang Nor A Whimper
Geetha Ravichandran
- 15 | Don't Judge
Manasa Komaravolu
- 27 | Flour
Somendra Singh Kharola
- 55 | True Connection
Aman Chougale

Cover Acknowledgements:

Model: Meeta Walawalkar
Passionate about her family, baking, travelling, and saris, our pretty cover model Meeta also loves Reading Hour.

Photographer: Sujatha Raju
All about light, colour and beauty, Sujatha is a personal styling and life skills coach, and keen photographer.

ESSAY



- 56 | The Argumentative Indian
Manjushree Hegde

41

Yellowstone
Sarah Rand

28 | LIGHT STUFF

38 | REVIEWS

60 | LAST PAGE

FIRST PERSON

- 16 | Laying Plans In The Wild
Nita Pavitran

INTERVIEW

24

Anuja
Chauhan



FICTION

Priyanjana is a student and writer. She is working towards completing her B.A. in Economics from Jadavpur University.

Awake Too Soon

Priyanjana Pramanik

He came in late that night. It had been raining since early evening, and Poppy could smell the rain on him as he sat down beside her. She was awake, but she kept her eyes closed. She lay there quietly. She listened to him breathe.

He sat there for a long time, it seemed, before he reached out and touched her hair, so gently that she would not have stirred, had she really been asleep. He coiled one thick golden lock around his finger and murmured something underneath his breath.

The words were known to her, but she could not place them. Either way, she felt that it was time to wake up. She did so convincingly, before smiling up at him.

"Robert," she said, reaching up to kiss his cheek. "When did you get back?"

His reply barely registered, but she felt herself responding, reacting as she should. She dragged herself awake and got him some tea; found him a change of clothes. She lay awake for a long time after he had gone to sleep. The lines he had quoted were tantalizingly familiar, and they echoed in her head. She could not shake the feeling that they were important.

"You're late," Joan said accusingly,

as Poppy finally made her way into the restaurant.

"Two minutes isn't late," Poppy said wearily. "For someone who hates my husband, you have a great deal in common with him."

Joan looked hurt, as Poppy had known she would. She took advantage of her best friend's silence and sat down opposite her.

"I resent that," Joan said. "And it's not that I hate him. He gives me the creeps."

There was no love lost between Joan and Robert, something Poppy had gotten used to but never stopped wondering about.

"Your OCD tendencies occasionally give me the creeps too, darling," she said, smiling slightly.

Joan had to let that one pass, because the waiter arrived.

"By the way, Miss M. A. English Literature, you'll be interested to know what poem we did yesterday at my poetry appreciation class," she said, once he had moved away.

"Tell me," said Poppy, taking a sip of her wine. Poppy's degree was a small joke between them, and Joan had started taking the classes to prove once and for all that although she had studied law, she was no philistine.

“Robert Browning. ‘Porphyria’s Lover,” Joan announced proudly. Poppy’s glass jerked involuntarily, spilling a few drops of wine.

“And thus we sit together now, and all night long we have not stirr’d,” she recited softly, remembering exactly where she had heard the words before.

“You know it by heart?” Joan asked disbelievingly.

“No... Robert quoted a few lines of it last night and I couldn’t place them until you mentioned Browning,” Poppy said, draining her glass and wondering why she felt so cold. Joan, instead of making a smug remark, noticed immediately. Tactful for once, she changed the subject.

“Noah Maitland’s in town,” she said, noting with satisfaction that she had Poppy’s complete attention once more.

“Is he?” she asked casually. “I didn’t know that.”

Joan smiled, waited barely a moment, and pounced.

“So you didn’t, by any chance, have coffee with him yesterday after he dropped by with some papers for you to sign?” she said. Poppy flushed a deep red, and after a few seconds, Joan took pity on her.

“Serves you right for hiding things from your best friend. Especially when the ‘thing’ in question works with her. Are you going to tell me about it?”

Poppy considered it.

“I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it yet, Joan,” she said finally. “I’m sorry.”

And Joan, to her relief, didn’t press it.

If someone had told Poppy ten years ago that she would marry a man like

Robert Barnes, she would not have believed it. But Poppy’s priorities had changed the day her parents died in a car crash, the day she had first had to face the world alone. Until that day, she had barely noticed Robert, ten years her senior, well known thespian, family friend. After, he was a pillar of strength, a shoulder to cry on, whatever she needed him to be. When the worst of the ordeal was over, she realized that yes, she needed him. They were married a few months later.

There were things that worried Poppy about Robert. His attention to detail, his compulsive neatness, his obsession with punctuality were things that had amused her at first, before she realized how he could react to things going wrong. His peculiarities, if they could be called so, were well known in city drama circles. He would not tolerate anything out of place, any anachronism on stage, even if it was during a rehearsal. There was a story about a period play he had done, working for an award winning, world renowned director. During the first rehearsal, Robert had realized that one of the props was a ball point pen, as a quill could not be found. He had refused to rehearse until a quill was procured, listening to no excuses or explanations. The play had been a huge hit, but the story was not forgotten.

There were other incidents, more personal, more painful, harder to forget. Poppy told herself she deserved them. And yet, when she had met Noah Maitland the previous day, it was as though she was releasing a breath she had not known she was holding in.

His firm, Joan’s firm, had represented her for as long as she could remember.

Noah was a partner, and should have been above bringing her papers to sign, but Noah did not appear to mind. She had not been expecting him, or anyone for that matter. Robert would not be home for hours. Her coat was thrown across the sofa. Empty bowls of ice cream littered the centre table. When the doorbell rang, she thought that Robert was home early, and her reaction was blind panic. He was already upset with her because she had lost his key. But he did not like to be kept waiting at the door, and she chose the lesser of two evils and ran to open it.

"I'm sorry about the mess," she said breathlessly, before realizing that it was not Robert at all. It was a man she had met only once, introduced to her by Joan at some party. It was Noah. Pleasantries were exchanged, and he stepped in, noting with interest the books shelved according to name, author and number of pages, the curtains which appeared to have been ironed into perfect creases.

"A slob indeed," he'd said dryly, but his smile was infectious and Poppy had smiled back.

And so it began.

It was evening by the time Poppy got home. After lunch, Joan had suggested a movie, and Poppy was only too happy to agree. But while Joan was engrossed in the spy thriller, she had been lost in her own thoughts. By the time the end credits began rolling down the screen, she had come to a decision.

Poppy let herself into the apartment and saw that Robert was already home. That was good, she told herself. The

sooner she got this over with, the better.

"Robert," she began, her voice shaking, "I need to talk to you."

He came over to her swiftly, caught her elbow, steadied her when she would have fallen. He saw the look on her face, interpreting it correctly.

"Don't say it," he said, his voice perfectly level. "Don't say it just yet."

She stared at him, mesmerized, like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. She said nothing.

"Enjoy this moment," he continued, his voice softer now. "This is the moment before everything changes, Poppy. We can't bring it back later, no matter how much we want to."

He touched her hair, curling it around his fingers, as he often did, as he loved to do. He touched her neck, gently, almost hesitantly. She stood, unmoving.

"I won't hurt you," he said, even softer. Then, "It won't hurt."

The spell was broken. Poppy stepped out of his arms, encountering no resistance. She did not look at his eyes; she looked at his hands, arms still outstretched. Then she ran.

Poppy fled down the stairs and through the lobby once she reached it. Not until she had reached the corner of their street did she slow down. Later, she would wonder why she had done what she did, if her reasons were reasons at all, if she had only been imagining things. For now, she asked nothing of herself.

She would call Joan and ask her for a place to stay. Sometime in the near future, she would apply for a divorce, and then she would marry Noah, if he still wanted her.

Turning back, she looked at the building that had been her home all these years. She stared at the entrance, slightly confused. There was no one there.

Poppy shook her head, trying to regain her calm. First, she told herself grimly, walking away, she was going to get a haircut.



POETRY

Neither A Bang Nor A Whimper

Geetha Ravichandran

Geetha is a bureaucrat posted in Bangalore.
She enjoys writing now and then.

A monkey waltzed in
through my window –
swiftly reached for the jar of biscuits,
chewed on a CD and dropped it.
It fingered the keyboard
and leapt back into the open
landing on a dangling branch
and reached out for the skies.

Rather like some people
suave and superfluous
who traipse in through the door
amuse you to distraction
and swing out stylishly
to seize the world.

Sometimes passion ends this way –
with a few chuckles and some chatter –
as run-down batteries and crumpled sheets
are casually tossed out of sight.



FICTION

Lekha... lotus-eating in Mysore.

Flyway

Lekha Nair

There is a low wooden bench in the narrow verandah that runs along the front of the Bodhidharma Cafe. It's a precarious old ruffian, this bench, swaying drunkenly on three legs, the fourth corner being propped up by a column of bricks.

Every afternoon, at three, when the chaos of lunch-time has whirled and eddied and finally stilled, Sumi's husband, Naren, puts down a plateful of chopped up boiled eggs on the bench and goes back in to check on the day's takings. Presently, in synchronized descent, two crows sweep down from the gulmohar tree, scattering bright red flowers. They alight on the rim of the plate, cocking their heads this way and that, and begin to delicately pick up bits of yolk, fastidiously avoiding the white.

Inside the Bodhidharma, the decor is self-consciously ethnic. From the colourful mirror-work cushions, huge brass planters, mango-leaves strung across the entrance, the antique coconut-scraper, bamboo shelves, fish-skeleton wind-chimes, to the game of chess laid out on a table. At one end of the room are the murals Sumi has painted – black, leafless trees writhing across the ceiling and walls. The room is open on two sides,

separated from the outside only by a two-foot high wall. Across these open spaces, she has strung multi-coloured auspicious hangings, printed with the names of the twenty-eight Buddhas.

Two women and five men walk in. The men are clad in shabby, shapeless T-shirts and shorts, while the women sport baggy pants and strappy tops unencumbered by bras. Their blond hair is streaked with sweat and their skin is raw and sunburned. They put down their yoga mats in a corner of the room and go across to tell Naren what they want to eat.

"Seven rice-and-dal, two alu gobi, ten rotis, tulsi-ginger tea!" Naren calls into the kitchen, and turns to switch on the stereo. Muted Buddhist chants like sonorous temple bells course through the cafe which is beginning to fill up. Naren stares at an elderly couple, clearly local, who have stumbled in and are gazing about themselves, bewildered. They are obviously out of place here. They'd be more comfortable sitting across a marble-topped table, ordering a by-two Mysore coffee and rava idlis. Not here. The unwritten menu features only organic, pesticide-free, vegan, oil-free, lightly cooked, mildly spiced fare. A cuisine designed for immortality. They

huddle on one of the spindly benches, waiting to be served, while around them, the lithe, sweaty bodies troop up and down, ferrying trays laden with food. “Self-service!” calls Sumi who has just noticed them. They continue to sit for a while, waiting. Presently, they get up and leave.

Naren shrugs and goes out to continue wrestling with yesterday’s Sudoku. His dark-skinned hands have short, squared-off fingers and when he grips the pencil, it’s as if he’s made a fist around it.

Sumi is yelling, “Naren!” and then, “Bloody sink’s blocked! Again!”

He looks up from his paper and stares, without really seeing it, at the crowded bus gasping up the slope of Yadavgiri Main. The jacaranda trees lining the road are just coming into bloom and their mauve mist is a gentle riposte to the strident red of the gulmohars.

Mysore – a city where time would like to stand still. But will it?

“Naren!” her voice retains its pitch but is louder in tone.

He weighs the paper down with a jug of water, stows the pencil away in his pocket, and goes in. “Do you have to announce that the sink’s blocked? Again? In front of our customers?” he mutters, getting down on his knees and feeling about under the slimy bottom of the huge cement sink.

“What do you want me to say, then? Come here, jaanoo, I need you? Right now?” she laughs.

That laugh. He’d first heard it spilling out from behind a bookshelf in Hindu College library. Like the screech of

car tyres on a wet road mixed with the cackling of a goose. He had found it annoying then and he still does, nineteen years later. But her face was that of a goddess in bronze. Serene, with long-lidded eyes, full lower lip perpetually curved into a faint smile, flat forehead, rounded cheeks. He had peered round the bookshelf to hiss “Shut up!” Instead, he’d gazed transfixed at the miniature burnt-umber goddess and felt a powerful urge to slide that unruly lock of hair back from her forehead. They had gone to the canteen for chai. Talked till the young helper began wielding a broom round them. And married three months later.

They’ve moved so often, he’s forgotten some of the places. Now he will go nowhere from here. This city with its jalebi palace and faux Rajasthani market-places, its pleasant weather and parks full of old couples wearing sneakers and T-shirts emblazoned with the names of obscure American universities, gifted them by their NRI children. This is home at last.

He watches Sumi run her hands through her hair and turn to grab a wet wipe. She’s obsessive in some ways. Always scrubbing some surface or the other, raising her chin and sniffing like a dog when she enters the kitchen. Puking easily. Even the thought of various body fluids makes her gag. It’s a draconian law in their home that no reference to any kind of excretion, exudation or secretion can be made during or after a meal. She will immediately clap her hands to her ears and scream, “Nooooo, you pigs!”

It is a relatively quiet day. The yoga enthusiasts are just a trickle yet. In a

couple of weeks, there won't be a spare bed-and-breakfast in the vicinity. They appear every winter, like migratory birds, chattering in a babel of languages – French, German, English, Russian. They carry very little luggage apart from their rucksacks, yoga mats and a couple of changes of clothes. Their passports, money and documents are packed carefully and the first thing they want to know when they look at a likely rental is whether there's any locked storage available. Most of them have beautiful, sculpted bodies, with toned muscles and glowing skin. They always move in groups and seldom get invited to middle-class homes. Instead, they strike up friendships with women who are employed as house help, with auto-rickshaw drivers, fruit vendors, shopkeepers, newspaper boys – these are the realms where the civilizations meet.

When they first moved to Mysore, Sumi set up a yoga class. She had learned yoga from the masters in Haridwar and Poona. But she soon figured out that there was more money in feeding bodies than enriching souls. The cafe has been very profitable for the last decade and though they can certainly afford to expand, neither of them has ever talked about it. Naren does all the cooking early in the morning, and generally chips in whenever required, while Sumi and a couple of itinerant staff manage the cafe for the rest of the day.

Now, while Naren struggles with the block, Sumi gives the helper instructions and goes out to stand behind the counter.

Jeeva is crouched over her school-

books fanned out on the counter top. She sticks a tiny bit of her tongue out between her teeth. She's working on her maths homework. Her skin is double-cream poured over roses.

"Finished, bacchu?" Sumi asks, reaching across to straighten the transparent box labelled "Tips for Staff".

Jeeva bursts into a diatribe. "Ma, does it bloody matter when a 270 m long train traveling at a speed of 170 km per hour crosses a man running in the opposite direction at a speed of ***-ing 2 km per hour? Who the hell cares?"

"Language, Jeeva," Sumi murmurs absently, her eyes ensnared by the shape that Jeeva's mouth takes on when she says, "***!"

A mouth like that. Feet and hands like that. Hair like that. Those summer afternoons. Thirteen years ago.

Jeeva, exhausted, abandons the train and the man running in the opposite direction and squeezes past Sumi to go and sit on the wobbly bench. Her legs splay out because it's too narrow to accommodate her expanding frame. But she knows exactly where to sit on this unstable perch.

At twelve, she's already more than a head taller than both Sumi and Naren. A gentle breeze moves the leaves of the gulmohar and a stray beam of sunshine slants across Jeeva's head. Naren's glance lingers on the pale gold strands glinting in the sunlight. He stretches out a brown hand, captures a shining skein, and tugs at it, seemingly lost in thought. Jeeva giggles and pretends to bite him. Naren bares his teeth at her and they start to

make growling noises at each other.

Voices swirl around inside.

"Three rotis and two mixed-veg!"

"...ran out of @#\$\$ toilet paper..."

"One fresh lime soda, salt no sugar!"

"...je pars demain..."

".....u. etc. o. Surya-namakar this morning..."

"...three weeks in Bangkok..."

"Six green teas!"

"...rufen Sie mich an..."

The crows have scattered bits of boiled egg round the plate. One of them does an experimental skip before flapping its wings and hurtling over the roof. The other hops around a bit, cleans its lethal-looking beak elaborately against the edge of the bench and then leisurely ruffles its back feathers, looking straight at Naren.

"Pass me a paper-towel, quick," Naren snaps. "Damn birds shit all over the place."

The crows zoom off inelegantly to sit on the wall of the house next door and glare at the gulmohar. Naren watches in silence as a magnificent Greater Spotted Eagle appears on one of the lower branches. A passerine bird – flown in from god knows where. One of the many migrants that can be spotted in spring and summer. With Ranganthitthu and Kukkehalli Lake so close by, at this time of the year, there are plenty of out-of-towners to be seen hereabouts.

He's not even sure whether this is a Greater Spotted. Birders he's spoken to have been dismissive. "Probably an Indian Spotted... Greaters generally



don't come down so far south," they opine. He's occasionally contemplated putting down a plate of offal or raw meat, a dead bandicoot or a couple of lizards, for these tourists, but Sumi won't hear of it.

Without warning, in a sublime glide, the Greater swoops, lifts a chunk of egg white and vanishes back into the foliage.

Jeeva's voice is an intrusion. "Pa, why the @#\$* do you tolerate these damn birds? All they do is fly in and out, eating and crapping."

He avoids her young blue-green eyes and begins mopping the watery white mess on the bench.

He can see, at the corner of his vision, Sumi frozen at the counter, a hand outstretched to gather up the scattered school-books. The crows break into a dissonant cawing.

When he speaks, his voice is slightly loud, like that of a teacher explaining something to an inattentive student.

"It's called a flyway, Jeeva, the flight path used by birds in migration. An operational concept. Along such paths, they sometimes use stopover sites to rest and refuel."



FICTION

Subhash is a retired Associate Professor of English.
He enjoys writing short stories.

The Magic Of Moolah

Subhash Chandra

The sacred knot had come undone. A paralysing hush descended on the core group sitting around the bedi – the boy's parents, his sloshed Chacha, who jerked his drooping head up every now and then to show that he was awake, the girl's parents, her two maternal aunts, and a close friend of the girl's. The hush swelled in concentric circles, enveloping everyone in the silk palace.

The palace had been erected at a cost of five lakh rupees. It had five rooms, each fitted with full size mirrors, vanity bags, and perfumes; and a sixth room for the beautician whose mobile phone number was pasted on top of the mirror in each room. One phone call and she appeared pronto. The ladies could change, deck themselves up afresh, or get their faces touched up.

Then there were two rooms for the men. In one of them sat the laundry man with his fully automatic Samsung washing machine and drier, and an ironing-man at his side. If a guest spoiled his clothes, help was readily available.

At the entry gate, two decorated, live elephants had been stationed, with their mahouts, who got the mighty creatures to salute guests as they entered the pandal. Inside, feigning statuesque immobility,

was a look-alike of the famous Bollywood star, Salman Khan, with his trademark bare torso and faded jeans. Diagonally opposite him, was the look-alike of a well-known film actress, still and smiling in a seductive pose. It was freezing cold in the second week of January and the hero – a skinny young man, derived some warmth from sneaking occasional glances at the actress when no guests were around. He had been instructed to blink stealthily and infrequently. The male guests generally passed by him without a second glance, but they lingered, chatting, in front of the actress.

The groom-to-be (or GTB, hereinafter) and the bride-to-be (BTB, hereinafter), stood facing each other, bewildered and speechless.

It was after surmounting stiff resistance from their respective parents that they were now getting united. In the girl's family, the mother had been dead against the alliance. She had moaned, "How'll she adjust in the Panju family. They're so bold and loud. And most of them eat flesh and drink sharaab."

The father, too, was not enthusiastic and dolefully agreed with his wife. "I share your fears. She's our only daughter."

In the boy's family, the father had

put his heavy foot down, when GTB broached the topic. "Nothing doing! Marrying into a family of Banias!" Mr. Bhatia spoke in a loud voice. "What a community! Surviving on dhuli mung ki daal, and watery potato curry! They don't live life, but weep through it. They earn money not to spend, but to count it," he snorted. Then he added forcefully, "A Bania would sell his father for money!"

The mother intervened mildly, "But we should think of our boy's happiness... besides, whatever you say, Banias are easy going people. Our son will have no problems in controlling the girl."

The issue had hung fire for a long time. Finally, the GTB and BTB met over coffee and hatched a plan.

"You see, we have this advantage. You're an only child. And so am I," said the GTB.

"So?"

"We can blackmail them," said the GTB brightly.

BTB waited for him to continue.

"Threaten them. Say that you will jump in front of the metro, if they don't agree."

"Terrific plan, Piyush!" She glared at him. "And if they still don't agree?"

He was thoughtful.

"I'll have to implement my threat if I've any self-respect," she mused. "Perhaps that'll suit you fine. You could then be an obedient son and marry a Panju girl."

"Don't be a moron, Mukti! I love you for God's sake. I, too, will scare my parents."

"Like how?"

"I'll tell them I'll run away to become a sadhu. They won't be able to recognize me, leave alone trace me."

"That's good. You'll open many all-girls ashrams across India?" she snickered.

"Yaar, you're impossible, Mukti!"

She remained glum.

"Okay, here is another suggestion. Let my Dad meet your Mom. I tell you he's a charmer. He can con investors into putting crores into his mega real estate projects which are still on paper. Now he is into building Malls. Big money in it. Without investing a single paisa of his own, he walks away with huge sums when the building is completed."

"How stupid you can get! You're giving me all this shit about business. Even if your Dad was a magician, you've no idea at all about the Bania community. A middle-aged, married, Bania woman, going to meet a man in CP! Simply atrocious! She'll drop dead at the very idea!" She then added, "Of course, I don't blame you. Panju women are different!"

"I'll punch your pug nose."

"Why did you fall for this pug nose? And why do you want to become a sadhu for this pug nose?"

The hush turned into a storm of babbling voices, some of them raised to wailing tones. The mother of the girl, who was sitting with her husband by the side of their daughter, seemed on the verge of collapse. The parents of the boy looked stunned. The starched, erect, pink pagris quivering with excitement and bobbing about energetically thus far, now sagged and became listless.

The Pundit had looked at the sundered knot in consternation and fright. He had tied the knot. He looked towards the simulated heavens – the light blue ceiling

with sequined stars twinkling on it -- and interpreted it as a signal, nay command, from the Higher Authorities that this marriage was not approved by them. As a matter of fact, the slippery sari of the BTB, costing a fortune, and the equally expensive velvety, plush angavastra of the GTB had played mischief, and wriggled free of the knot.

"I had told Shanti to stop her daughter from this marriage," said the elder Maasi of the BTB.

"I would never let my daughter marry a boy from a Panju family. I would say, Mukti has had a providential escape." This was the younger Maasi.

"But can you stop grown up children from living their own lives?" said the Chachi of the GTB, who was also sitting with them.

"Huh, it is the samskaras you give them during their growing years. Girls from our community don't go against their parents' wishes."

"But the parents of Mukti are here." The Chachi was sharp and wielded a genetic assertiveness.

"You people are living in the fourteenth century!" snorted a cousin of the GTB, supporting her mother.

A middle aged man, who looked educated, sitting near the group, was exasperated. "How strange you women are! Spare a thought for the poor parents and the boy and the girl."

The women fell silent. But then a young boy came running, "Punditji is leaving. He says he'll not perform the marriage."

A bright young man suggested, "Why get into the mumbo jumbo of the empty rituals and the phony pundits in the first

place? It's all bunkum! The two can go to the office of the Registrar of Marriages' and say -- to hell with everyone. We are married!"

The GTB's drunk Chacha who had moved away and was dozing on a sofa, came to, partially, and enquired as to what was going on. After soaking in the details, he bellowed, "Oye pundita, teri tan bhain di ... teri taan Ma di..." and started stumbling towards the bedi menacingly, his fists clenched. "I'll make faluda of you. First you tie the knot loose and now you are running away!"

Three-four men restrained him.

"Have you gone mad? Beating a pundit is like killing a cat."

Another said, "The sin will take you to hell."

"Oye, I don't bother. Bring seven cats and I will wring their necks here and now! It's all bakwaas."

Despite everybody's pleas, the pundit prepared to leave. He hurriedly picked up all the currency notes -- each was either five hundred or one thousand -- that he had made the girl's and the boy's parents put on several items: on the ganga jal kalash, on seven betel leaves, seven strands of kusha, seven coconuts, the two asanas on which the boy and girl sat, and folded his hands to everyone in a Namaste to signal his departure.

"Punditji, please think of our izzat. And of the girl. What will happen to her? She'll die a spinster," wailed the girl's father.

Her elder Maasi tried to cajole him, "Punditji, you're made in the image of God. You are his agent. If you want, you can intercede on our behalf."

“Behenji, if I perform this marriage, I will partake of the sin. I and my family will be punished by the gods.” With these words, he started walking out of the pandal slowly, with heavy steps.

The boy’s father, an astute man, had taken note of how the pundit had swept all the money into his cloth bag. When the pundit reached the gate of the pandal, the boy’s father caught up with him, saying, “Punditji, one minute.”

Taking off his pagri, he put it at the feet of the pundit. He placed it upside down, with two bundles of five hundred rupee notes placed neatly in the hollow. “Punditji, please find a way out of this tricky situation. I’m sure you can do it.”

The pundit looked around. They were away from the crowd. So, he said, “O.K. I don’t promise, yajmaan. But I’ll see if anything can be done.”

He returned to the bedi, sat down cross-legged and took out his three books and leafed through them. He kept turning the pages, reading with full concentration, for about twenty minutes. An anxious stillness reigned in the pandal. The girl’s family, especially, looked on with worried hope. Finally, the pundit said, putting his finger on a particular page, “What’s the time right now? Please be exact.”

The girl’s father promptly looked at his watch. “11.58 p.m.”

The pundit heaved a sigh of relief and swept everyone around in his smiling gaze. “Just wait for two minutes. The date will change. And then the position of Shani and Shukra will shift from the houses they occupy now. There is an upaaya after that.”

No one seemed to breathe during

that time. The women were mumbling prayers silently, moving only their lips. A few of them had closed their eyes and folded their hands.

“Now listen carefully,” said the pundit. “The parents of the girl will have to fast twice a week for six months. At the end of that period, they will host twenty one pundits for bhoj, consisting of seven vyanjans. At the end of it, the pundits will be given an item of gold each. It could be the smallest piece.” But he knew that wouldn’t be the case. The opulence all around had convinced him. He paused and resumed, “And a set of winter clothes.”

Then he told the girl’s parents to sit in front of the sacred fire, which he had rekindled in the havan kund, and take an oath that they would fulfil their vow. This done, the pundit asked everyone to sit down calmly and recite with him the Gayatri Mantra five times with complete faith.

The marriage was solemnized. A ripple of joy ran through the guests. The festive mood returned. After the pundit left, his cloth bag bloated with the moolah shoved into it by two sets of grateful parents, the merriment started. A Bollywood actress, specializing in item numbers, had been engaged at a whopping sum of fifty lakhs. She took the stage, and regaled the gathering. Every now and then, she would prance off the stage and dance among the guests, touching somebody’s nose or cheek or arm, causing great excitement.

The guests ate heartily. The parents of the girl went round pressing everyone to eat ‘properly’. The Chacha went to the

bar and downed one more bottle.

The bride and the groom were alone.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Piyush smirked.

“What?”

“That my dad is a charmer.”

“Show off, Panju!” Mukti stuck her tongue out at him. Then she commented,

“So, your trick failed...”

“What trick?”

“To get rid of me.”

Piyush rolled his eyes in mock weariness.

“Pity, you took all that trouble to get this stupid, slippery angavastra,” continued Mukti.

“Aren’t you sharp!” commented Piyush.

She pinched him cheerily in return for the compliment.



Manasa is a software engineer by profession, and a capricious ambivert by nature. She has appeared in The Poetry Society of India, Woman’s Era, Blogger’s Park, Indian Review and Wordweavers.

POETRY

Don’t Judge

Manasa Komaravolu

Don’t judge my love,
maybe you never loved anyone
with such reckless abandon,
so madly, and completely.

Don’t judge my longing,
maybe you’ve never felt,
the way I feel in his arms
– like a wild symphony.

Don’t judge my jealousy
maybe you’ve never owned
someone the way I did
– like he was a part of me.

Don’t judge my tears
maybe you’ve never lost
your friend, lover and God
all that a person can be.

Don’t judge these lines
maybe you never felt like
your heart will burst
if words didn’t set it free



FIRST PERSON

Laying Plans In The Wild

Nita Pavitrán

In the north-eastern craggy corner of India, night always falls suddenly in December. If we don't come up with a plan quickly, there will soon be no sunlight to guide us; just the light from our jeep slithering along the ground, threading through the gigantic dark silhouette of the Himalaya. We – two couples and a child – have just learned that the Mayodiya Guest House where we had made reservations for two nights is closed for some unavoidable reason. There are no other hotels, shops, buildings of any sort, nor any other tourists in sight. The only human beings we see in the fading daylight are a small group of road-workers, putting away their tools.

We could stay in the makeshift corrugated-metal shack of the road-workers, its rear precariously plush with the edge of the road, at an altitude of 2655 m. Or we could go back 174 km to the comfortable town of Roing, with its market and sweet oranges. Or we could go ahead to a circuit house that the road-workers have just told us about, not too far off, in a village called Hunli. Whether we move forward or double back, the lonely winding mountain road, lined with snow patches and rhododendron, is narrow and unlit.

Nita loves books, movies, long walks, motorcycle rides, the smell of deodar, and birds that she wishes she could identify by their songs.

Photos: Nita Pavitrán

We had been warned that there would be no electrical power in several villages in Arunachal Pradesh. "Carry your own food," our host at Roing had advised us. So our friend Obi, who dreams of starting a restaurant in his hometown, has stashed a sack of vegetables, rice, spices, oranges, and a live chicken, all from the Roing market, at the back of the jeep. The chicken shatters the chilly silence with a loud clucking, and we push ahead to Hunli.

It is night now, at 4.30 pm, but we are at the gate of the circuit house, which is occupied to the brim by ten soldiers. Obi and my husband approach the caretaker, a young svelte Adi woman. Could we at least park here and sleep in the jeep? Mou (Obi's wife), Arnab (their son), and I wait in the jeep. We hear the mezzo-soprano voice of the caretaker, over the thunderous laughter of the merry-making young soldiers, saying there is no room, not at all, not at all!

From the shadows, an older man, the captain, approaches our jeep and shines his torch on us. "Let them take one room. We'll all manage in the other," he tells the reluctant caretaker. Visibly grateful, Obi tells her, "Don't worry about the cooking. I'll cook! I have all the ingredients."

The cold, cloudy, beautiful night



vaguely reminds me of Mona Lisa's smile. The soldiers huddle off somewhere, "out of respect for the old", jokes our new friend, the captain. He calls for a bonfire and invites us to join him. We bask in the warmth of the fire, the fragrant meal that Obi has prepared, and Old Monk. We share our stories. The captain has lived in many remote places in the country, such as this. I ask him about Tawang. "Tawang is white, white, white! I yearned to go back home to my green fields!"

My thoughts meander. Last year, this day, my husband and I were on the western edge of India, the Thar Desert, riding a camel named Michael Jackson. Mou and Obi say they want to see the backwaters of Kerala one day. Arnab is snoring on Mou's lap. Obi carries Arnab, and the four of us shuffle

into our room holding candles and torches, feeling around for the beds to fall into and sleep.

In the morning, we see how dirty the sheets are. The blanket that my husband and I shared has holes. Obi tells us that he slept on the bare floor. How did we all survive the cold night with no fire, no electric heater?

We step out of our room and see a chain of blue-and-white snow-capped peaks as far as the eye can see. Words fail us. This magical quietness. So rare.

The massive army truck rolls out of the gates with the captain and his soldiers. Obi, Mou, and Arnab settle into the vacated room. Then Obi goes to a cemented area behind the kitchen, where the chicken is tied by its leg to a pillar. I remember, from years ago, a man





in Kerala chasing a chicken with a knife around the well. No matter how far I ran on my tiny legs or how loud I cried, I heard the dying clucks of the fowl, loud and clear, months after. Today, I watch the killing with curiosity.

Mou and I sit with our plates of chicken curry and rice and tell each other about our lives. I am meeting Mou and Obi for the first time. Obi and my husband were classmates; they were both 16 when they last saw each other. Forty now, Obi is a recovered drug addict and happily married with a son. I assure Mou that we are not sad that we don't have children. Our husbands join us and we are laughing again about this and that.

The caretaker brings in two friends – women in black sweaters and several necklaces, revealing only a part of their

bright chubas below their waists. The older woman has a rectangular piece of green cloth tied around her mouth. In the baskets slung down their backs by leather straps from their heads are kiwi fruit for sale. Their eyes crinkle gently when we buy some of the small, green-fleshed sweet, slightly sour fruit.

Somewhere, a school bell rings and the sun sets almost immediately. I think of my colleagues in Bangalore. The sky will be bright there for three more hours. Obi goes off to the kitchen to cook. The caretaker makes a bonfire and we join her.

The caretaker asks me where I am from. "Bangalore," I answer, tossing baby potatoes into the fire to roast and eat. She asks me whether it is true that North-East Indians are being attacked in Bangalore. I tell her it's a rumour. In Bangalore, a North-East Indian restaurant changed its menu to Chinese and Tandoori after its cooks fled the city in fear. Then she tells me about her friend who ran away to Bangalore with a man from her village and then off again with some other man there. I tell her it's going to be very difficult to trace her because Bangalore is vast and thickly populated.

"I am going to find a man and run off somewhere too," she sighs. "Life is hard here. When the river floods the valley, the roads break, food is scarce, firewood is scarce."

"I have a pig," she adds, "I bought him when he was tiny for Rs 300. I don't have to feed him. He feeds on garbage, now he's very big. I'm going to sell him for Rs 30,000." She plans to use the money, find a man, and run off to the other side

of that mountain, she points.

"To China"? She doesn't answer. I ask her about the man who came to see her earlier that day.

"He's a truck-driver. I was only giving him orders. I've a timber business."

She has to clean up, she says suddenly, and leaves us with no more firewood. In a while, we notice that the moon has moved and we retire to our rooms. We have a long journey back tomorrow.

We wake up early and eat leftovers from dinner by candle-light. The store near the circuit house that we went to yesterday had no bread, no biscuits. I suspect that the storekeeper lied because he wanted to keep his stock for the village, in case the road broke again.

The caretaker goes in and out of our rooms as we pack our bags. She scolds us for leaving the candles on, then urgently blows them out and slips them into her pocket. They are our candles, but we

don't say anything. Obi comes into our room to ask us if we have seen his knife. "The soldiers must have stolen it," says the caretaker, her arms akimbo. Then she shouts, "Give me the room keys." We can't find ours and she fines us a hundred rupees. We grumble about her as we drive out.

We drive round and round down the mountain, watching the blue peaks layered against each other in the distance. I tell the others about the caretaker's plan. Everyone smiles. In the surreal wild, dreams become plans. I dream of a spacious apartment.

About a year later in Bangalore, enjoying our coffee and the splendid view of Nandi Hills from our new, fifteenth floor apartment, we receive a call from Obi. Obi and Mou have just opened a restaurant in Guwahati... and bought a pig! We laugh and hope that the caretaker has carried out her plan too.



"The more often we see the things around us - even the beautiful and wonderful things - the more they become invisible to us. That is why we often take for granted the beauty of this world: the flowers, the trees, the birds, the clouds - even those we love. Because we see things so often, we see them less and less."

~ Joseph B. Wirthlin

Recommend Reading Hour to friends overseas!

**Digital version of Reading Hour now available for
Apple, Android and Amazon. Visit magzter.com.**

FICTION

Sweet Lies

Anitha Murthy

Anitha (www.thoughttraker.com) is a software consultant who lives in Bangalore. She loves to write whenever inspiration strikes her, and has been published both in print and online, in various genres.

Sunil enters just as Leela is lifting a piece of cake to her mouth.

“Stuffing your face, eh?”

Leela puts down the cake immediately.

“This is the first piece I’m having; I haven’t even tasted it yet.” Her protest quavers just a little, but Sunil is already distracted, reaching across the table to help himself to some cake.

“Junking out all the time, that’s what your problem is,” he says automatically. A line that pops up as predictably as bread out of a toaster in their conversation.

Leela goes to the sink, blinking back sudden tears. She can’t think of a quick retort, a clever reply that will make him pause and evaluate his words before spouting them. He’s a good man, she tells herself, he means well. Suddenly his hands slide around her thick waist, and he drops a kiss on the top of her head.

“You make the best cakes, pumpkin!”

Just as suddenly, he’s gone from the little kitchen. With a rueful shake of her head, Leela begins scraping the debris off the dinner plates. For all his faults, Sunil really loves her cooking. He can’t stop raving about it, especially to others. At first, Leela preened when he invited folks over at the drop of a hat, but lately, especially after Advaith, she has begun to feel vaguely resentful. She feels like

a prized child being asked to “show the auntie-uncle what you can do!” She still cooks wonderfully though, her busy hands whipping up gourmet meals like a genie.

The house is quiet by the time Leela finishes clearing up the kitchen. Advaith is in bed, and Sunil is watching the news in the bedroom. Leela rips off two milk coupons, puts them in a plastic bag, and as she goes to the front door of their apartment to hang the bag outside, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror that adorns the wall near the entrance. It’s a fancy mirror that has a large glass hexagon, with smaller, diminishing glass hexagons adorning the metal rays that emanate from the centre. It looked wonderful in the showroom, but Leela hates this mirror now. The multiple reflections show a rather plain and overweight woman of average height, hair pulled back into a loose bun. Sometimes, Leela feels that it is mocking her in multiples, daring her to go out into the world carrying all that extra, ugly obesity. When she goes out nowadays, she hurries past it, almost as if it were a bad omen to look.

When Leela goes to the bedroom, Sunil is engrossed in some TV debate, chuckling and nodding as one party

speaks with vehemence. Leela is tired and flops down on the bed. She watches the debate too, letting the words wash over her like a familiar wave.

Just as she is drifting off, Sunil reaches for her and wraps his arm around her ample body. He kisses her gently on the cheek and turns her towards him. Leela is about to protest, but then the memory of her reflection suddenly comes to mind. You're lucky, a little voice whispers, to have a husband who still loves you, who still wants you. She swallows and returns Sunil's kiss with a passion that is forced at first, but gently rises to match the truth of her feelings for him. Later, as Sunil snores next to her, she examines her feelings once again. No, it's not just gratitude. She loves him. She does.

Two weeks later, Leela lies alone in the bed. The TV is on, tuned to the channel that Sunil watches every night. But he is not there, and she is not sleepy in the least. She's wide awake and actually listening to what the anchor is saying, not treating it as a lullaby. When the mobile rings, she's on the phone in a trice.

"Hello?" She says, and waits for an eternity before the delayed response.

"Lee!" Sunil's disembodied voice still makes her feel special.

"Hello Sunny. How are you?"

"Good. Settled down, more or less. But work is killing, man. Barely got any sleep. Was up working late last night."

"Oh."

There's a pause, and Leela understands it is her turn.

"Everything's going on as usual here, Sunny. It's getting warm, Advait doesn't

want to wear his jacket any more in the mornings. They are going for a field trip next Tuesday from the playschool."

"It's cold out here, Lee. Damn cold. They're saying a storm is going to hit us, expecting tons of snow. Feel like having your tomato soup, man!"

Leela smiles. It is the way he expresses his feelings, all through her food.

"How long will you be there, Sunny?"

Another pause, only this time she hears his sharp intake of a long breath.

"Could be a while, Lee. They're saying four to six months."

"Six months?" Leela's voice rises sharply. "But you said it was just a couple of weeks."

"I know, I know." Sunil tries to placate her. "That's what they told me, too. They said this was the initial study phase, just a couple of weeks would do. But now that I'm here, the client's pushing real hard. They want the entire proof of concept done in three months. I told them it's complicated, it won't happen in three months. They asked me how long, and I said six months. And they said, if that's what it takes, that's what it takes."

Leela goes silent. She does understand where he's coming from. She was working too before Advait. She knows how things go, that he probably doesn't have much of a choice. It's not his fault that he said a couple of weeks initially. These things happen. Still she's upset with him, as if he has betrayed her.

They talk a little more, both rather subdued at the separation that has hit them for the first time in their four years of married life. So far, it has only been a couple of days, or a maximum of a week.

After Advait, Leela doesn't even notice these absences, busy as she is with her son. This time though, it's different.

"Good night, pumpkin. Don't eat my share of food as well, or you'll explode!" Sunil teases, just before he hangs up.

Normally, Leela would have laughed, but tonight, she's feeling bitter. She lies in bed, a slow rage building up from embers that lie buried deep within. Does Sunil think of nothing else but food? And what does he think – all she does is gorge on food the whole day? Pumpkin, he calls her. Just because he has great metabolism and can indulge his gargantuan appetite without adding an ounce doesn't give him the right to make fun of her!

She rises and goes to the mirror at the dressing table. She studies herself carefully and her heart sinks. Sunil is right. She is indeed a pumpkin. Her middle billows out on all sides, her top and bottom are heavy, and her head looks like a pin stuck in a cushion. She goes back to bed and turns the TV and light off. She stares into the inky darkness focused on nothing in particular. As sleep wraps her in its embrace, a germ of an idea begins to take root. Drowsy as she is, it fills her with a sense of hope.

Leela cannot contain her excitement as she checks outside the window for a taxi pulling up. Sunil should be home any time now. Advait is still in bed; it's a Sunday. But Leela has been awake since the early hours, barely able to sleep. All she can think of is what Sunil will say when he sees her after six long months.

When the taxi does pull up and she sees Sunil disembarking, it takes all of

her willpower to stop herself from flying down the stairs and surprising him. She watches impatiently as he removes his suitcase from the boot, examines the driver's bill, and then pulls out his wallet to pay. As if sensing her impatience, he looks up and breaks into a smile when he spots her at the window. He waves, and she waves back before pulling away from the window quickly. She doesn't want him to see her; she wants it to be a surprise.

It feels like forever by the time the elevator reaches their floor. Sunil steps out, looking fatigued and crumpled from the long flight home. He tugs at the recalcitrant suitcase which has a tendency to stop rolling all of a sudden, holding the elevator door open with one hand.

"Hey!" Leela calls, her excitement bubbling over.

"Hey," he replies, still distracted by the suitcase. Then he turns and stops. His jaw goes slack in amazement.

"Lee." His voice is husky. "What happened to you?"

Leela laughs happily. She slides the bulky bag off his shoulder and pulls him in.

Sunil sinks to the couch, unable to take his eyes off Leela. She has lost so much weight she's looking svelte! In fact, she hardly looks like the Leela he remembers.

As he settles down, Leela fills him in happily with the details. How she decided to join the gym, how, by an incredible coincidence, her best friend Jahnvi was thinking of the same thing, and had told Leela of a reduced price offer from the neighbourhood gym the very next day, how she felt fantastic every time she

went to the gym, the changes in her diet that had made all the difference, how she'd found it so very hard to keep it secret from him as the pounds started melting away so that she could give him a surprise....

Jet lag catches up with Sunil and he drifts off into slumber land, his ears still ringing with her chatter.

Leela is on cloud nine. The surprise has exceeded her expectations. Sunil is floored. She laughs merrily now and then as she lets her sleeping husband snore away while she whips up a meal.

Sunil wakes up by noon, groggy and confused. When he sees Leela, he is not sure if he's dreaming. She looks so different. That's all he can think. When she asks him if she looks more beautiful now, he finds it hard to speak, and just nods. He bites back his habitual baiting at the dining table. After all, she's having a salad and a bowl of curd. All the usual jokes he used to pull her leg with – they're no longer relevant.

He feels he has strayed into an alternate universe. The six month separation and the jetlag and now this new Leela. She hasn't changed really, she's still her old self, that much he can tell. But somehow, her weight loss has affected him much more than he cares to admit.

Leela can feel this. As the day progresses, her euphoria begins to evaporate and her upbeat mood gets more and more muted. Is he really not happy with her transformation? Everyone she knows has gushed over it; her friends have complimented her effusively. Yet Sunil seems almost aloof. She cannot

understand it. That night, they lie beside each other, stiff and wondering.

It takes another three days for Sunil to get back to his routine. Conversation between them has become stilted now. Sunil finds himself more formal with Leela. She is rapidly becoming confused and unhappy. Five nights have passed, and Sunil has not reached out to her even once.

Leela lies on her side as Sunil watches TV. How can everything remain the same, and yet be so different, she thinks. And then the dam breaks. Hot tears flow down her cheeks, which she does not bother to wipe. It's only when a small sob escapes her during a break in the news that Sunil realizes she's weeping.

"Lee, Leel!" He taps her shoulder, and she shrugs him off.

"What's going on, Lee?" He switches off the TV and turns her around. He is as distressed as she is when he sees that she has been crying for some time.

She shakes her head, but then hugs him tightly. Her mute message is not lost on him. He returns her embrace, holding her till the sobs subside.

"Hey, I'm sorry if I've been a bit off," he starts, but she just shakes her head and lies down again, back towards him. He sits still for a minute. Then he reaches out and turns her towards him.

They embrace, as always, and as his hands encircle her reduced waist, he can't help thinking how much he has missed her, how much he misses her. All of her.

But that, it is obvious, will have to remain a secret.



INTERVIEW

ANUJA CHAUHAN

Anuja Chauhan is the reigning queen of the romantic comedy genre in Indian commercial fiction. She quit a successful career in advertising – she had risen to vice-president and executive creative director at JWT, India, before resigning – to take up writing fiction, since it gave her greater ‘creative control’.

Her first book, *The Zoya Factor* was about an advertising executive who ends up becoming the lucky charm of the Indian cricket team. The second, *Battle For Bittora*, was about young, urban candidates battling for a Lok Sabha seat and the third, *Those Pricey Thakur Girls*, was about the Hailey Road Thakur family and their five alphabetically named daughters. Her latest novel, a jump sequel titled *The House That BJ Built*, is about the Thakur family squabbling over the 200-crore Hailey Road property belonging to Retd. Justice Thakur.

Anuja, who dislikes her novels being categorised as ‘chick-lit’ writes clever, rib-tickling prose, littered with wordplay, tongue-in-cheek brand references and snappy dialogue.

Here, she tackles the Reading Hour interview in the same breezy, forthright style.

You had a stellar career in advertising and won more than a 100 national and international awards. How do the rewards and recognition of a writing career compare, thus far?

Thank you! Advertising work is always collaborative – and so both bouquets and brickbats are shared out amongst a lot of people – reward and recognition for writing, on the other hand, like Gollum says in *LOTR (Lord Of The Rings)* is ‘MINE MINE, My Precious!’

You say you started writing because it gave you complete creative control... four books on, does it still feel that way? What motivates you to keep writing?

Yes, very much so. Writing motivates me to keep on writing. I keep writing because I want to know what happens next. Also, I truly believe we get better and better at something the more we do it.

You must've had the 'inside' story on the Thakur family, growing up yourself in a gaggle of sisters! Is the Hailey Road family 'close to home'?

I've grown up in a girls only home, in a hostel for girls, and then studied at Miranda House, an all-girls college. It's easy for me to write about girls.

What do you find most challenging about writing a novel? What comes easy?

The middle of a novel is the toughest thing to write. The beginning is easy – you're all pumped with a new idea and you're raring to go. At the end, you can smell the finish line, and that keeps you going. The middle is the slog, when it's all up in the air and your characters are stuck in predicaments you don't know how

they're going to get out of. Sometimes it seems quite a hopeless mess and just not worth the effort.

You've done 4 'rom-coms' now, how do you keep it new book after book?

I'm not sure I'm keeping it new! I've been accused of writing the same hero four times over, so I'm consciously trying something different this time...

You've mentioned that characters in your books are a mish-mash of people you've come across... has this ever gotten you in trouble?

No! It's quite funny, people don't seem to recognize themselves in books... or maybe they have, and they're just not saying it to my face, but planning a deep dark revenge instead!

You have a wicked sense of comedy and there are these must-laugh-out-loud moments in your books – does it come naturally?

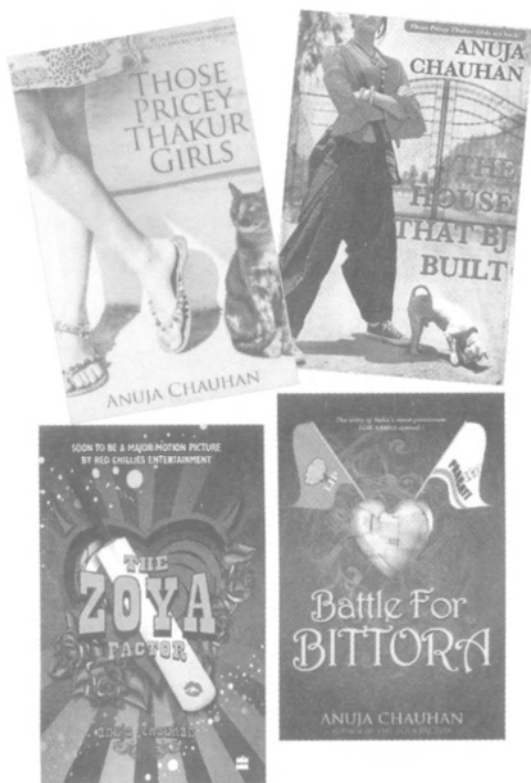
Mostly, yes, it does. Sometimes I strain at it a little... and then try and fix that in the rewrites.

Your marketing / advertising background must come in handy, given that authors are expected to actively market themselves and their books today...

Not really. The kind of brands I've done advertising for, are very different. They're mainstream, big ATL budgets. Books are different. I've relied on my publisher for all that.

Do you enjoy events, festivals, and social media as a way of connecting with readers? Any particularly memorable reader comment(s) you'd like to share?

Yes I do. It's great to meet people. So energising, because writing is essentially a lonely job – you sit at your laptop and hammer away for a year or more. So it's lovely to meet people and sign books and answer questions and all that. And people who are interested! Because usually, I only talk to my family about my books (as I'm writing them) and they're heartily sick of it by the time I'm done.



You're writing screenplays too – could you share something of the experience?

Nothing's come of it yet, so I'm not too gung-ho on screenplay writing at the moment. I really think book writing is the best. That way you have creative

control. Movie screenplays are a bit like ads – too many other people involved in the process.

You know your Delhi and your Dilliwalas well! Any plans of a novel in a different setting?

I'm not very sure why people keep saying I write Delhi novels. Half of *The Zoya Factor* happens in Australia. *Bittora* is set in Bittora and Bombay. It's only *Pricey* and *House* that are Delhi novels. I think I'm more desi than Delhi...

Your take on 'literary' vs 'popular' fiction...

No take as such. Good books are good books. Please do not put me off perfectly good books by telling me they are 'literary' – I may never pick them up then!

'The House That BJ Built' is about the changes in Delhi – a "metaphor for change in the city, change in our outlooks, our moral codes and ways of life." How do these changes make you feel as an individual/person?

I think they're inevitable - and we might as well embrace them. I take a pragmatic view. I don't understand why people want to cling to crumbly old bungalows like they're human or something. I feel people are more important than bricks and mortar.

Any favourite contemporary Indian writers and / or books?

Yes, I love Vikram Seth.

The book you dream about writing one day...?
The one I'm writing next!

POETRY

Somendra is an undergraduate studying
science at IISER Pune.

Flour

Somendra Singh Kharola

The cold steam of my breath manifests the glass
like a pebble the surface of still water. Inside, a morgue.
The walls are the bleached calluses of an old fisherman.
I murmur a couplet sung by Kabir, who wept when he saw
proud grains of wheat being crushed to bone-white flour
between the violence of two grindstones. His toe-tag
is left blank, intentionally (no one is coming to
claim him). Perhaps, he was a loner, oblivious
to the world like the singular shoe
rooted to the sea floor. Or like the ecosystem
of insects and dust beneath heavy carpets.
I imagine the thumbprint on the steel of his spoons
dangling in the kitchen. The image is as poignant
as when I had slipped into an abandoned house
in our mountains, and seen dated pencil marks
of a growing child on the wall. The toe-tag twirls caught in a draft.
The iron gurney is not padded and would be cold, no different
from the hard clay floor upon which we used to sit cross-legged
and eat dinner. First, the elders and then us. Brother and I would fight
for the spot where Father had just finished because of the warmth.
Today, Father's skin has wrinkled, has become the
wings of a moth. Age's advance, I realize, is subtle.
The hairline recedes as slowly as Arctic ice, and the flesh
dwindles like the thick steak eaten by a proper lady with a fork.
I murmur the couplet by Kabir once again.
The grindstone of the universe above turning this way,
the grindstone of Earth below turning the other way. And
in between, this reaped grain of life. *Nothing survives*, weeps Kabir, *Nothing survives*.
I really only want to slide a pillow beneath the painful arch of his neck.



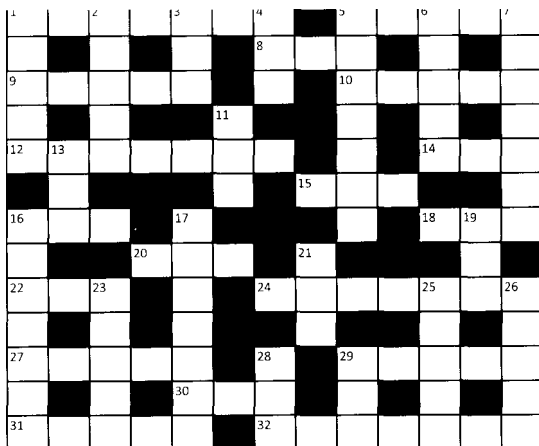
LIGHT STUFF

Across

1. Harassed with bent wire rod (7)
5. Close with part of address above (3, 2)
8. Dirt ends with irritation (3)
9. Start fire, take chance and search (5)
10. With Maud I open a channel of sound (5)
12. Did wrong again we hear, so cancel (7)
14. First lady the previous day(3)
15. Yank back inside (3)
16. Become old and end wise man (3)
18. Diminish French baby somehow (3)
20. Veil dropped partly for a poke (3)
22. Smear the poet back without red(3)
24. Cl-i- h----- t- b-i-----d-- (7)
27. Wildflower or animal impudence (5)
29. Adornment for girl with one (5)
30. Tell untruth, we hear, for cleansing (3)
31. Search that trashy Lyle modestly(5)
32. Listened fired at can hear (7)

Down

1. So thin, lost child, we hear, with hesitation (5)
2. Cover somehow without direction the debris (5)
3. Drown finally and dye (3)
4. Colour we hear and pass (3)
5. (7)
6. Priest trimmed anyhow (5)



7. Adage for action (7)
11. Single and united (3)
13. Urge protein (3)
16. A short way ending you round America is hard (7)
17. Vessel with nothing to serve is a collection (7)
19. Objection with part ram (3)
21. Small fish tail (3)
23. Stomach alarm followed by end of sleepy (5)
25. Belt holding twitter hoard (5)
26. Fungus you start with direction (5)
28. Busy insect (3)
29. Black Jack (3)

Solution: Page 50



Subscribe now! Or gift a subscription...

☐ 1 year (Rs 300/-) ☐ 2 years (Rs 600/-)

☐ Print (in India) ☐ Electronic

Name: _____

Address: _____

Landmark: _____

City: _____ Pincode: _____

Email Id: _____

Phone: _____ (landline) _____ (mobile)

DD/Chq (favour Differsense Ventures LLP, payable in Bangalore)

Bank & Branch: _____ No.: _____

Please allow 3 weeks for delivery. Email readinghour@differsense.com for queries or bulk orders. To subscribe online, visit readinghour.in

Address: Differsense Ventures LLP
177-B Classic Orchards, Phase 1
Bannerghatta Rd, SOS Villages PO
Behind Meenakshi Temple
Bangalore 560076
80 26595745 / 98450 70264

Which issue would you like to start your subscription from?

Month: _____ Year: _____

Note:
Reading Hour back issues are available.

Aparajith teaches history at a management institute in India. He blogs occasionally and enjoys writing short stories, one of which was included in Penguin's First Proof 7.

FICTION

Tie-Breaker

Aparajith Ramnath

Frank was standing outside the Renshaw, fidgety in his linen jacket and jeans. His hair was more heavily touched with grey than I remembered. Through the French windows of the Renshaw behind him I could see middle-aged men in diagonally striped ties and discreet cufflinks, women in dress suits, with pots of tea and club sandwiches on the tables between them. From time to time, Frank stole glances at them. I knew what he was thinking: lucky debenture holders. To his left, families, couples and groups of friends made their way to a large, familiar building: all glass and iron, flowerpots blooming lilac on the dark green parapets.

"Hi... Henrietta." He stooped to kiss me lightly on both cheeks. I caught a whiff of cologne: he appeared to have changed brands.

"You haven't called me that in a long time," I said, smoothing my dress.

"And you haven't been so punctual in a long time." He winced. "I didn't mean that."

"Never mind. It's not as if you have to make a good impression." I gave a tentative smile. "How've you been?"

"Well ... getting by." Frank shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Tell you what, let's get to our seats."

We walked past a couple of stalls selling souvenirs before turning right to enter the large green building. Inside was a cavernous hall on whose white walls was mounted a sequence of pictures, beginning with drawings (including one of a man in a cap, breeches, and moustaches – the Renshaw who'd given his name to the restaurant), running through several black and white photographs, and ending in a colour photograph of a young, long-haired Spaniard, his teeth sunk into the exquisitely carved handle of a gleaming golden trophy.

"What stairway are we on?" I asked.

"Let me have a look... right, here it is. Fifty-four."

We found the entrance to Stairway 54, showed our tickets to an expressionless security guard, and emerged into the stadium. A patch of grey-blue sky loomed in front of us. On every side were rows of dark green seats, most of them already occupied. In the centre, some distance below us, was a patch of lush grass some forty metres by twenty.

It must have been our twentieth visit to Centre Court at Wimbledon. But this time it was only May, not the fortnight when June turns to July, when what purists, pedants and pundits call 'The Championships' take place.

We'd come to watch the retired trio of Agassi, Graf, Henman and a soon-to-make-a-comeback Clijsters play a clutch of exhibition games to mark the inauguration of the new, stupendously expensive retractable roof that had been added to Centre Court as an insurance against the wilful clouds of south-west London. We made our way to our seats as the BBC's anchor strode out onto the court, sporting her trademark silver hair in a blunt cut, a slightly crumpled beige suit and a half-sheepish smile. After some introductory comments, she walked off the court as the translucent roof began to slide over the top of the stadium from either end.

"What did Vanessa say when you told her you were coming here?" I asked Frank, leaning over.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I didn't tell her."

As the roof's halves inched closer to each other, four impossibly dapper young men stood on a podium beneath it and began to sing Vangelis's *Conquest of Paradise*.

I first came across Frank Agnew when we were both at university. We stayed in the same student halls and bumped into each other occasionally in the dining room, though I was never really in his set. He was something of an eccentric, an Old Wykehamist who had given up a place at Cambridge to study in London in an attempt to mix with the *hoi polloi*. But there the attempt ended. The cultivated careless manner, the scarves, the maroon corduroy trousers, the long blond hair

falling casually across his forehead, the deliberate, plummy voice, all made me want to yell 'Bloody toff!' He studied literature and quoted incessantly from what he called the *Modern Masters* (though he abhorred Shakespeare). I couldn't deny that he had a sort of dry wit, but it could drive you up the wall – you never knew whether he was being serious or facetious. Everything came easily to him. He sang bass in his college's a cappella choir, debated his way to victories at the Union, and had two pieces published in the *Times Literary Supplement* before he graduated – all with the same air of nonchalance. The only time I saw him speak earnestly was one sunny July afternoon in Regent's Park, when he stood at the prow of a punt, pushing the oar against the muddy riverbed as one of the party crossed swords with him on 'The State of Contemporary English Literature'. He ranted against postmodernism and 'all that sort of twaddle'; called magic realism 'the greatest hoax perpetrated on an unsuspecting public since stream-of-consciousness novels,' and frowned when this drew laughter; resting his chin on the oar, he spoke through clenched teeth of the need for a fresh, honest, realist voice. It was only when the boat began to rock dangerously that it occurred to him to resume his habitual air of languid ease.

As for me, I can't say I caused too much of a stir in my undergraduate years. I preferred to sit back and listen while my friends spoke with all the enthusiasm and naïveté of a stage of life I seemed to have bypassed entirely. I spent long hours in Bloomsbury's many libraries reading

whatever caught my fancy, or browsing in the second-hand bookshops near Leicester Square. I went running in the sprawling parks whenever the weather permitted it, even experimenting with a Walkman clipped to my tights. When summer tiptoed up to the city, gradually turning it a brighter shade of green, I began to play tennis every alternate day. I daresay I had a flair for it, and developed a competent volley from playing plenty of doubles. When I went home to Newcastle between terms, Mum made much of this, introducing me as some sort of tennis whiz every time relations came visiting.

Three Octobers came and went. I was now a graduate in economics. I got a summer job with a small company in a back street in Southwark that published brochures for universities. I found that I had a keen eye for lurking typos. I enjoyed the challenge of turning confused copy into coherent prose with minimal slashes of the pencil. Summer bloomed and receded; cardies and naphthalene balls emerged from suitcases, and I was offered a full-time job at the company. Having no other plans, little money, and no particular desire to join my university friends in their backpacking trips across the 'developing' world, I accepted the offer.

Over the next couple of years, I settled into a routine, managing to work in a half-hour jog in the mornings and the occasional swim at the council pool. Spring took forever to arrive; when it did, I made straight for the nearest tennis courts. Sometimes I managed to convince a colleague or neighbour to come and

rally, but some weekends, I couldn't play for want of a partner. I'd hang around the courts, hoping to find a group that needed one person to complete a doubles pairing.

It was on one of these occasions that, sitting on a bench in the late evening, I saw a chap with neatly cropped fair hair playing doubles two courts away. There was something jarring about the sight, but I couldn't quite work out what it was. He was making a valiant attempt at keeping the ball in play, but wasn't finding the going easy. He was especially tentative with his backhand, getting into position late and slicing awkwardly. At the net, he handled his volleys in a panic. Slowly, it dawned on me: the incongruity lay in this show of mediocrity by someone I'd always associated with supreme confidence and poise. The match ended with the man fluffing an easy backhand volley, and the party walked over to the bench. I stood up. "Frank Agnew. How've you been?"

We 'caught up' over coffee, then had a drink at the pub a few evenings later. In time, it became a weekly ritual. Frank had mellowed in the three years since I'd last seen him. He'd toned down the sarcasm. Along with the new haircut, he'd got himself a new wardrobe: the corduroys and colourful jumpers had given way to ties and pinstripes. He was now a denizen of the City, having joined a market research firm.

"Whatever happened to your 'fresh, honest, realist' literary voice?" I asked him one day. "Expecting to find it in sales reports for shaving foam, are you?"

"I detect a hint of mockery."

“Well, takin’ the piss is how I’d put it.”

“I don’t recall ever saying all that stuff about literature to you.”

“Ah, but you wouldn’t, would you? It was probably for the benefit of one of those posh things you had trailing you everywhere. You know, the ones who looked like you’d find them in Country Life in a year or two.”

Frank smiled. “Well, young lady,” he said, exaggerating his public school accent, “I haven’t given up. I’ll have you know that T.S. Eliot spent years in a bank, and several more as a publisher.”

“Ah. I’d forgotten you were in the Eliot league. Another pint of the same?”

“Yes, but I’m going to get this round.” He rose, loosened his tie, and went over to the bar, returning some minutes later with our beers and a bag of crisps, although he knew I didn’t touch anything fried.

“You know, I’ve been thinking you might give me some tennis lessons.”

“Who, me?”

“Who, I, you mean. And you say you’re an editor? Yes, you. Will you?”

“But what makes you think I’m any good?”

“I may not have seen you play the other day, but you had quite a reputation in the old days.”

“I had no idea you took the least interest in my doings.”

“Now, now, don’t go flattering yourself. I used to discuss tennis a lot with some of the chaps you played with.”

“Hmm. And why didn’t you ever play with us?”

“Oh, you know. One was busy. Debates and things. And of course there was, as

you just noted, the bevy of beauties from the Home Counties.”

“One was busy. As though avoiding the word ‘I’ makes you less of a narcissist.”

He was eager to learn, but while he got more effective with practice, finesse remained beyond him. He used the shiny Wilson T2000 and the double-handed backhand made famous by Connors, whereas I wielded a Dunlop 200G and rather fancied the Navratilova mould. His gawky tennis style was so unexpected, and so much at odds with the air of smug mastery that I associated him with from our student days, that I found it endearing. So it came as a not unpleasant surprise when Frank began one May morning to talk of Betjeman and Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, rhyming it (somewhat weakly) with Miss Foth-e-ring-ham. At first I wasn’t sure what he saw in me – stubby-fingered, mousy-haired me, whom years of tennis had not made as lissome as the blondes who surrounded him in college, whose Geordie vowels must have sounded provincial to his aristocratic ears. But his wooing was persistent if not dramatic, and it was pleasant, after years of desultory dates with men I had little in common with, to spend time with someone I enjoyed talking to. Three days later, as we walked down the South Bank, he made bold to kiss me, gentle, warm, and a great deal more assured than his volleying technique. We spent that weekend together – all of it – and it was with a ridiculous mix of elation, apprehension, excitement and peace that I dressed for work on the Monday.

Two months later, he popped the

question. “How would you like to watch the men’s finals at Wimbledon?”

“But you don’t have a TV.”

“No, I meant live.”

“You’re not allowed to do that, you know.”

“Do what, Hen?”

“Have me on.”

But he wasn’t. He’d entered the public ballot several months ago, and the draw had come out in his favour. Two tickets for Finals day. On a gloriously bright July afternoon, we watched Sampras and Ivanisevic slug it out with their whiplash serves, entranced by the occasion and our own newfound happiness. “They ought to ban these snuggling couples,” I heard someone say from two rows behind. “What a waste of Finals tickets!” We couldn’t have cared less.

A year later, we were honeymooning in Paris. We climbed up the hill to the Basilique du Sacré-Cœur, posing for the obligatory couple photograph against the Parisian skyline, a friendly American tourist doing the honours. We wandered around Montmartre aimlessly, up and down the little sloping alleys and side streets, ending up in an Algerian restaurant and eating mounds of couscous. It was a cheerful little place, and the buxom proprietress seemed to be everywhere at once, taking orders, totting up bills behind the bar by the entrance, dashing to the little service window to collect dishes as they emerged. Asking for vin rouge and pointing to items on the menu was easy enough, but at the end, Frank had to get out his phrasebook before he could ask, “Acceptez vous les cartes du crédit?” raising his eyebrows

and shoulders slightly in (he imagined) a sophisticated French manner. We needed the phrasebook whenever we asked the price of anything at roadside cafés throughout that trip. The only numbers we really understood were zero, fifteen, thirty and forty, which we knew from listening to umpires call out the scores when we watched the French Open on the telly.

Back in London, we set up home in a rented one-bedroom apartment in Elephant and Castle. Our respective careers progressed satisfactorily. I gradually climbed the editorial ladder at the press, which was growing steadily; Frank, starting as an analyst, was now manager of a small team. On our fifth wedding anniversary, he announced that he’d seen an ad for a flat – and wasn’t it time we bought a home together?

“Where’s the flat?” I asked.

“Wimbledon.”

“Oh? The better for you to run to the tennis?”

“No, I don’t think I’ll go to the matches anymore if we move there.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because, my darling,” he answered, putting his arms around my waist, “it has a balcony directly overlooking the All England Club.”

I tried to look nonchalant as I held his lapels. “I presume you’ll want me to pitch in and buy the binoculars.”

Friends found themselves especially keen to visit us during Championships fortnight, and who could blame them? We were most at ease with Joe and

Sheila Sidebottom, whom we'd met at an amateur doubles tournament during our Elephant and Castle days. Joe was a portly, balding accountant, Sheila a housewife ('homemaker' hadn't caught on yet). During the first week of the Championships, we'd all get off work early, plant ourselves on the balcony, wine glasses in hand, soaking in the atmosphere even as the TV commentators spoke of soaking up the pressure. Court 18, with TV studios on one side and a grassy hillock on another, was closest to us – we had a clear view and could actually follow the matches played on it. The other outside courts, sandwiched between Court 1 and Centre, were farther away, and the players appeared as indistinct white specks. We had a game: we'd try and identify the players with the naked eye, and settle the question later with a pair of binoculars. Frank was the most opinionated of us all. "That has GOT to be Korda!" he'd shout, catching sight of a slim left-hander on Court 15. "Just look at the forehand. That grip, the way he pulls his racquet back before unleashing that topspin: it can't be anyone else."

"But doesn't Korda have a single-handed backhand?" Joe would ask slowly, as the figure in white thumped a double-fisted ball crosscourt.

"Yup, but that's him."

"That's he."

"...very clever, Hen. It's Korda alright. He's probably trying out a two-hander in the early rounds just for the heck of it. You know the game is moving increasingly towards the two-hander."

The binoculars, duly trained on the scoreboard, confirmed that the players

involved were Pioline and Vinciguerra. Frank would go off into a half-serious sulk, then brighten up and point to our glasses. "How about some Cabernet?" He'd toddle off to the open-plan kitchen, roll up his sleeves, and uncork a new bottle with great ceremony.

One summer after the next, we sat on our balcony, watching the crowds mill around, watching them part like a Biblical sea to let players through as they walked between courts, escorted by tournament officials and security guards. We saw the Williams sisters emerging individually on outside courts, and then playing doubles together on Court 18. We never saw Sampras, reigning lord of the grass, for he was always on Centre Court, and rarely saw Henman, the great big local hope – he was also on the show courts, and in addition to the thousands in the stands, he broke the hearts of hundreds watching on the big screen not far from our balcony, camping on the grassy mound that came to bear his name – Henman Hill. ("You do realise," Frank said, "that I'm your Hen-man?" "Of course," I told him, "you always keep me on tenterhooks.") We saw the ponytailed Swiss prodigy, Federer, once or twice on the outside courts. But our luck with the ballot was good, and we got to see some big matches on Centre; sometimes we'd take camping tents out with the Sidebottoms and queue up overnight to get Court 1 tickets. It was a lovely, almost spiritual feeling being on the wide expanses of the golf course just outside the Club. It got coldest just before dawn, and as the sky began to lighten, Frank,

sitting on a mat on the grass, the flap of our tent open, would envelop me in his arms to ward off the nip in the air.

We continued to play three mornings a week, as we'd done ever since we'd got married. Not, of course, on the hallowed turf so tantalizingly visible from our balcony, but at a local club a few streets away. And no, they didn't have grass courts, but a faded green synthetic surface so hard it made your knees buckle if you played for more than a couple of hours. We played doubles regularly, and in time, Frank became the consummate club player – sticking to his strengths, playing neatly controlled shots, mixing up some smooth slices with his double-hander, and using his height to good advantage at the net, finishing off any below-par returns of serve. From time to time, we entered tournaments together, and though we never won a trophy, we were often in the semis or finals. Those mornings were precious. Our respective schedules kept us apart for most of the day, and when we got home, we were too exhausted to lift an eyebrow in flirtation. On the court, though, we evolved our own code. The look Frank threw in my direction when I'd pulled off an unlikely passing shot on the backhand side sent a thrill up my spine. When we were on opposing teams, he'd hit the ball back to me five times in a row, until my partner shouted: "We're playing doubles, you lovebirds!" Frank was never one to verbalise his feelings, but those little gestures on the tennis court I came to accept as his equivalent of whispering sweet nothings in my ear – that they

were made in public added just that little frisson. Some days the spark stayed alive until we got home and slipped into the shower together.

It was around the time Henman's star dipped that things began to change for us. In the final years of his career, with Sampras and Graf long retired, Wimbledon began to feel a little empty. We found ourselves less enthusiastic to camp overnight for tickets; and outside of Championships fortnight, Frank seemed less and less keen on getting up at six for our morning game. Often I went alone, and when he came along, I sensed he wasn't eager to partner me when we played doubles. In the early days, Frank had been restrained, happily playing second fiddle as our opponents kept hitting the ball back to me at the baseline. Now he became aggressive, bossy. He began to poach balls on my side of the court, netting them and swearing loudly, as though it was only the vilest luck that had come in the way of a sure winner.

Office became increasingly central to his life. Everyone was talking of 'work-life balance': for some, like Frank, it was more like work-life equivalence. He was travelling regularly to client sites, first to Bristol, Southampton, Edinburgh, and later across the Channel to Warsaw, Munich and Copenhagen. From time to time, I tried to remind him of his magnum opus of literary criticism, the one he'd been wanting to write for years now. He always brushed it off with a joke.

During those years, I often accompanied him to office parties in the City (my office never had parties, and I

doubt Frank would have come along had it done so). Even in my best dress suit, I felt like a scraggly bohemian among that crowd as they stood around sipping their gin-and-tonics, with their scrubbed faces and angular cheekbones, their sharp suits and designer skirts. They spoke about the latest in the Financial Times, about whether New Labour was doing enough to encourage the banks, about the ups and downs in the stock market. When they weren't talking shop, they spoke of property prices, of holidays in Spain and Switzerland, of the latest 'amazing' author to be endorsed by the literati. These dos were usually held in one of those upscale pubs overlooking the Thames where a glass of wine would set you back as much as a meal in an average establishment. There were liberal doses of gossip, but mostly, the conversations were devoid of argument, so that they merged into one large, agreeable, gin-lubricated hum. As for Frank, he found himself agreeing with the amazingness of the latest magic realist authors his boss went into raptures over. He'd even developed the annoying habit of dragging me in to back him up. "I was just telling my wife the other day – remember, Hen? – that this was very probably going to be the book of the decade..."

The storm broke on a bright, clear June morning. Standing in my dressing gown on our twelfth-floor balcony, I felt the crisp, cool air – air that would warm up in patches, depending on where the sun shone at various points in the day. I could see out as far as the top of the slope of Wimbledon Park Road. On one side of it

was a large, sprawling field, dotted with vans selling coffee, sausages and burgers. A long human chain rippled across the grass, punctuated by folding chairs and smart, sporty tents. The queue spilled back out onto the road, inching forward until it reached a point in line with our balcony. By midday, all those people would melt into various parts of the AELTC, and the muffled sound of ball on racquet-strings would begin to waft up towards our home.

"Hen."

Frank was standing in the drawing room, looking unreasonably youthful in his white T-shirt and Bermuda shorts. He always slept in Bermuda shorts.

"Morning, Frank."

"Hen." He walked up to me, held me by the wrist, and sat me gently down on the sofa. "We need to talk."

Part of me braced for a shock; my stomach muscles tightened, and I felt my jaw clench. Yet, it was a kind of relief to know that whatever it was would now be out in the open. And so he told me, bit by bit. He'd met her at a pub on one of his trips to Bristol. They'd got chatting, and they found that he'd known her brother at Winchester. They'd lingered until last orders, chatting about the old days and their families and their schools, and they'd felt 'this amazing incredible connection'. They'd met several times since. He spared me the details of her looks, but I could picture her instantly: tall and willowy, chic clothes, a face that Wodehouse would have called horse-like – but a horse with pedigree.

For several minutes, I sat there, numb. I didn't know what he wanted, this man

with whom I'd spent the last thirteen years. Did he want forgiveness? Did he want out? Did he want to behave like one of his eighteenth-century aristocratic forebears and keep a mistress with the full knowledge of his wife? I looked at his face and saw the grey eyes, the dark pupils dilated with guilt, or perhaps embarrassment, I saw the widow's peak that had got accentuated in the last two years, I saw the fair stubble that covered the cleft in his chin. Then I rose and screamed. I let loose a stream of invective, dredging my subconscious for words I'd never uttered before. And I asked my husband to get the hell out of my life.

As we sat under the Centre Court roof, my thoughts drifted towards the last two years. I'd given him his freedom as rapidly as the courts would allow it; I just wanted to be done with it and get on with my life. He'd offered to sell me his share of the flat at a throwaway price, but I couldn't bear being alone on that balcony, every square inch of which smelled of his presence. We'd sold it off, split the proceeds, and gone our separate ways: he to Hampstead with his Vanessa, who'd cooperatively left Bristol, I to a flat in Canada Water, its new buildings, prefab warehouses and industrial-sized superstores as far removed from the genteel air of Wimbledon as could be.

"You know," Frank said, "I wasn't sure you were going to turn up, and God knows I couldn't have blamed you if you

hadn't." I had ruthlessly avoided him over the last couple of years, but when he'd called to remind me that it would be the fifteenth anniversary of our first Wimbledon – couldn't we be cordial acquaintances if not friends again? – something in the tone of his voice had made me soften.

"Well, I wasn't either. But hey, if the All England can put a roof on here, surely I can put a lid on my bitterness."

On court it was doubles time, with Henman and Clijsters facing the married couple. Graf had just struck one of her vintage forehand winners, her follow-through finishing up near her right ear, and the crowd erupted in delight.

"Do you still play much?" I asked.

"...not really. Vanessa's great, but she's not too hot on tennis, you know."

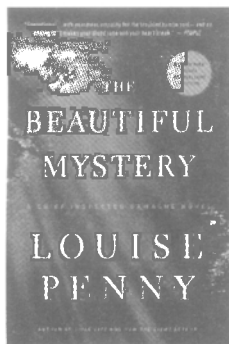
"Oh."

"She's keen on concerts, and the theatre... which I love, too, by the way."

The match, as exhibition matches will, was becoming theatrical itself. Kisses were exchanged between points, and once, as Agassi stood having a long chat with Clijsters at the net, Graf came running up to him, playing the jealous wife. The crowd laughed uproariously. "They're so cute together, don't you think?" the woman behind us gushed to her friend. "There's a great marriage for you. Some tennis, some Wimbledon, some love." I stared up at the roof. A single pigeon sat quietly on one of the rafters, oblivious to the thousands of spectators below. Suddenly I felt like leaving, and fast.



REVIEWS



The Beautiful Mystery
Louise Penny

Review: Shruti Rao

Usually set in and around the quaint, quiet village of Three Pines, the Inspector Gamache series of novels by Louise Penny could easily be mistaken for an English novel, written in the early twentieth century (during the genre's heyday). You'd be off the mark, considering Three Pines is a village in Montreal, Canada and Penny is a contemporary writer.

The Beautiful Mystery by Louise Penny is eighth in a series of eleven books (so far) involving Chief Inspector Armand Gamache. Working for the Sûreté du Québec, the series follows Gamache and his police team while they investigate crimes that happen in and around their village. While there is a detailed trajectory of plot and character overarching the series, each book works wonderfully well by itself – no matter which of the eleven books you pick up to read first. As is with all series, starting at the beginning is recommended, but in Penny's case, not at all necessary.

In this book, we follow Gamache into a secluded monastery called the Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups (Saint Gilbert amongst the wolves) which is isolated

from the rest of the world. One of the brothers has been murdered and Gamache has to solve the murder whilst living with the monks. In addition to their seclusion, the monks have also taken a vow of silence, breaking it only to sing Gregorian chants – a talent that is so staggering that it supposedly moves everyone who hears it. The title of the book is taken from the profound manner a listener is affected by the chants – a “beautiful mystery” that can move any man.

In many ways Louise Penny has exactly what the murder-in-a-small-community genre has been lacking for decades now – relevance. So even though Inspector Gamache is a middle-aged protagonist nearing retirement, solving cases in his tiny jurisdiction, the issues under consideration are achingly relevant. In this book in particular, Penny draws out our collective hive-mind anxiety of connectivity (via cellular phones and the internet) when set against the backdrop of a reclusive order of Christian monks who set up their monastery centuries ago for the prime purposes of not being connected to the rest of humanity.

Gamache and his deputy, Jean-Guy Beauvoir, are locked in with the monks at the end of day, determined to stay in the slowly decaying, but stunning, monastery for as long as it takes to solve the murder. This isn't escape, though. Penny isn't escaping the anxieties of the present by simply transporting us to a setting where time and connectivity don't exist – she beautifully brings it to the fore. With impeccable complexity, she paints us a

picture of monks who have each lived in the outside world before joining the monastery. This is not a group of naive adults who never knew the world outside. These are people who have consciously made the choice to live where they do. As far as the denouement of the mystery goes – it more than satisfies. Quite often, at the end of a great build-up, we are unsatisfied by how carelessly and quickly a writer will choose to tie up all loose ends and serve up a solution. There is none of that in this novel. The denouement is as layered and staggering as the build-up and this makes it an exceptional murder mystery.

One of the running strains in Penny's novels is the network of relationships between each of the characters. Just like in real life, the novel is as motive-driven as it is plot-driven. Not only do we get to peek inside every character's head, we also get an equal representation of how they translate into actions. A mainstay

of every Penny novel in the series is specifically the workings of the great mind that is Inspector Gamache. Without being preachy or didactic, she builds up a man who is demonstrably trustworthy, incorruptible and yet, endearingly human. Make no mistake, there are no idealistic absolutes in Penny's world. A lot of the characters appear through the series, and each of them has a character graph that can easily be a spin-off series on its own. The rich world-building of this fictional hamlet in Quebec is what has garnered Penny the status of being one of the most acclaimed crime writers of our time.

It is rare for a mystery book to last with you as an experience long after you've finished "solving the crime". *The Beautiful Mystery* will stay with you as long as you will allow it to, pondering over the questions that Penny quietly drops into the thought-wells of your mind, musing over both, man and motivation.



The House That BJ Built
Anuja Chauhan

Westland Publishers, 2015

Reading Hour Review

The sassy girl on the cover is Bonita Singh Rajawat, the same Bonu who plays a small but crucial role in *Those Pricey Thakur Girls* and is, as of the opening of *The House That BJ Built*, the 'lone Thakur girl in residence' at number 16, Hailey

Road. All grown up now, she runs the very successful Vicky's Secret, a garment fabrication workshop on the first floor of the house. This commercial enterprise flourishes on the otherwise residential Hailey Road by keeping all the Auntiejis happily supplied with rip-offs of the latest red carpet and Bollywood fare. Bonu's business, her grandfather – the widowed and slightly lost Justice Thakur (Retd.) – and her tenants, the Trings, keep her well occupied until the scourge of property 'hissas' which has struck every other number on Hailey Road, strikes number 16 too, bringing home with it the entire battalion of Thakur girls. A for Anjini,

editor of Allahabad Buzz from Allahabad, C for bald-headed Chandralekha of the RIGID (Redemption is God's Immortal Design) order from the USA, D for Debjani, owner of troubled news channel Network News from Mumbai, and E for Eshwari, chic, athletic New Yorker with financial issues of her own. All except B for Binni, Bonu's mother, who has died with the rest of Bonu's family in a road accident some years earlier. Sisterly equations remain mostly unchanged, as does Bonu's childhood crush on Anjini's stepson Samaruddin, who has since become a director of dubious acclaim in Bollywood. Also making re-appearances are Stheesh from down the road who now owns a successful construction business, and Gulgul, Justice Thakur's nephew who runs the neighbourhood gym and sports a Being Hanuman tee.

Things turn nasty when it's time to turn out the tenants and an old case resurfaces, threatening to break not only the deal they have with the builder, but also the family.

But Chauhan knows how to get her girls out of trouble, and hooked up with the loves of their lives, and finally, all's well that ends well for the many Thakur girls.

Rom-com as a genre has its limitations, perhaps. Heroes might be scruffy but they must appeal, heroines might have shades of grey but they must be easy on the eye and their hearts must always be in the right place... oftentimes, it feels like the obstacles littering the path of true love are contrived. But Chauhan makes sure there's enough 'story'. As in the previous books, there are parallel story lines, and things never get too mushy or sentimental before getting rescued by humour. However, what keeps one turning the pages is Chauhan's peppy, hilarious style that has not flagged after three books. Her latest offering too will have the reader bursting into laughter every now and then, as it's choc a bloc with Indianisms, crazy plot twists, and rapidfire badinage, especially between the sisters Thakur. Fun, and funny, this is a great holiday read.



Reading Hour

short fiction poetry essays reviews



To subscribe, fill out the subscription form elsewhere in this issue and post it with your cheque / DD (favouring Differsense Ventures LLP) to:

Differsense Ventures LLP
177B Classic Orchards, Phase 1
Bannerghatta Rd.
Behind Meenakshi Temple
Bangalore-560076

+91-80 26595745 / +91-98450 22991
readinghour@differsense.com

Print (India only) or
Electronic subscription:
6 issues / 1 year: Rs.300/-
12 issues / 2 years: Rs. 600/-

Or, subscribe online at <http://readinghour.in> or
www.magzter.com

www.facebook.com/readinghour

Sarah travels and enjoys watching and writing
about nature.

Photographs: Sarah Rand

ESSAY

Yellowstone

Sarah Rand

The Southwest may be the realm of poets and painters, the Davis Mountains the purview of astronomers and scientists but Yellowstone is utterly, completely, absolutely Shakespearean.

Going to any other National Park or State Park is like a Sunday promenade in the city compared to the experience of Yellowstone. At 2.2 million acres, 54 miles wide and 63 miles long, with average height 8000 feet above sea level, average daytime temperature a mere 35°F and the lowest temp on record at 66 degrees below zero, Yellowstone is special. The average water temperature in Yellowstone is 41°F and the average survival time in the water is 30 minutes. Yellowstone has more seismic activity than any place in North America other than California, it also has a greater density of thermal geysers than any other place on the entire planet. There are signs everywhere warning visitors not to get off marked paths in the thermal areas. Additionally, due to the churning magma beneath the surface the land in Yellowstone is rising at a rate of one inch a year.

3 million visitors a year, and it is open only from mid-May to end-Oct for summer visitors. The North and East

gates are open all year, for snow mobiles and winter activities. For more 'cheery stats' there is an interesting book called 'Death in Yellowstone' by Lee Whittlesey published in 1995. I chose not to read it before I visited there, but now, safely ensconced at home, perhaps it might not be a bad read?

We arrived at West Yellowstone at noon on a clear sunny day in June and continued our drive into the southern part of the park. This is the drive that leads to Old Faithful, arguably the best known geyser in the world. As we went past the Madison River the scenery opened up into vast meadows, where bison and elk grazed peaceably; it was charming, pastoral, very serene, a set readymade for *Much Ado about Nothing*! We went to Old Faithful. 85% of visitors to Yellowstone watch her erupt, which she does every 94 minutes like clockwork. We walked around the basin springs, watching the steam rise. Steam at 244°F spewed forth, (remember, water boils at 212°F), looking so soft and wispy, gracefully floating away, utterly benign, a gentle, healing, soothing appearance. A mirage, lulling visitors into a sense of security.

Like all mirages, it vanished before our



spirits reigned over the night, spirits of those we have done right by, or wronged, and it became a place of foreboding and mystery, at once attracting and terrifying one.

eyes over the next few hours. As the day waned and shadows lengthened, the mists began rolling in, slender strips slipping down from the snow-capped peaks of the mountains on to the plains and settling over the streams. The hot springs continued to bubble up, steamy fountains and cool mist comingled, twisting into incredible shapes now all white, now yellow and sulphurous, now turquoise tinged, all in a setting of cauldrons that bubbled and stirred seeming to invoke the past, the present and the future. One could almost sense the presence of witches, stirring and chanting summons to the spirits of persons, of animals and birds, of trees and plants, of rocks and mountains. Time collapsed and compressed into an incomprehensible entity. We were in a medieval Scottish / Macbeth era ambience; it was eerie. We were enchanted, we just stood and stared. I had to shake myself free of the spell to drive out of the park.

It was clearly time to go to one of the bars in West Yellowstone, load up on one's poison of choice, and begin to feel back in the present. Inside the park

Next day we set off on a pre-dawn drive back into the park. It was still shrouded in magic. The mists began rolling up the sides of the mountains, the rivers began revealing sparkling blue green waters and the steam incessantly bubbling up from the hot springs was spreading across the vista. The gentle daytime scenery became manifest with each passing hour until it turned charming and pastoral once more.

The incredible sights at Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons, while simply out of this world, are very, very recent in geological terms. The area was fully covered by ice in the most recent Ice Age which lasted 17,000 years, and melted a mere 10,000 years ago. As the ice melted it formed the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone and left waterfalls, crater lakes, rivers and streams in its wake.

On Day 3 as we were getting ready to leave the park, I thought that it had been a grand visit and except for not seeing a Grizzly in the wild, all my other must-see's had been satisfied. As we came down from Mammoth Hot Springs towards the Campgrounds of Madison we saw a small crowd gathered by the road and a Park

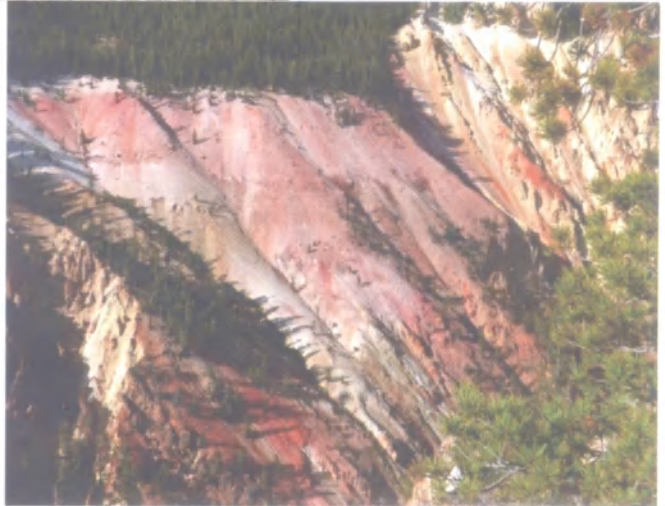


on the far bank of Indian Creek. It was paparazzi time and cameras were clicking madly. All that I was hoping to see at Yellowstone, including Bald Eagles and Grizzlies (seriously, it was one of each, the plural is sheer hyperbole!), in the wild, had come to pass.

Yellowstone merits visiting and revisiting. It is a place

Ranger was directing traffic. We had driven up this same road less than 4 hours earlier and then it had been quiet and not a soul had been around. As we slowed down we were told, “Grizzly sighting.”

Wow. We hurriedly parked, precariously like everyone else, and joined the melee, and lo and behold, a real live, honest to goodness, Grizzly. The bear was stirring around



Top & Above:
Yellowstone
Grand Canyon

Left:
Pastoral vistas
at Yellowstone
National Park



Clockwise from top left:
Bison herd, Grizzly, Startled Elk,
Old Faithful erupting

aware of how much there is around us that we can scarcely comprehend, let alone conquer. Here, going in with humility and being willing to listen and follow directions, can literally be the difference between life and death.

where the heart of the planet beats close to the surface with fierce, awe-inspiring power, and at no time is there a sense of man being able to dominate and control. In fact, in this setting, with all the guidance one gets, the marked trails, the railings, the pull outs for parking, the designated spaces, the staff, the modern electronics; in spite of all these things, one is always



Sonali spent years in the IT industry but now
wants to tread a different path.

Lost Friend

Sonali Gogate

On a Sunday afternoon in late November, I got off at Baradari, a small station with only two platforms. The train journey that should have taken three hours had lasted twice as long and the delay had made me miss my connecting train. Now, I would have to wait at Baradari till the next train, which wasn't until a few hours later.

I had been away from home for over three weeks now. Ravi took good care of our two boys when I had to travel on work, but this trip had been longer than usual and I couldn't wait to get home!

Hitching my backpack onto my shoulders, I wheeled my big suitcase towards the board that proclaimed "Waiting Room". Pushing the door open I was pleasantly surprised to see a big hall with some comfortable looking recliners, a couple of big tables and a few straight backed chairs that could be moved around. Inside the hall, to the right, I saw a door that I presumed led to the toilet block.

There was no one in the room, but a big suitcase and a handbag by a recliner affirmed the presence of another traveller. I dragged my suitcase to a recliner close to the occupied one and sat down. Then I pulled out my phone to call Ravi.

Feeling much better after the call home,

I decided to use the free hours that I had unexpectedly got, to do the one thing that I complained I never got to do; read! But before that, I needed a wash.

As I pushed the door to the toilet block open, I almost bumped into the woman coming out. Both of us took a step back and then looked at each other in surprise. I was suddenly standing face to face with a woman I had not seen in sixteen years.

Anaya was the first one to recover from the shock. "Namita?" There was an incredulous note in her pronouncement, and it reflected my amazement.

"Anu! What a surprise!" I stated the obvious.

She looked at my toiletry kit and said, "Go on freshen up; then we'll chat! It's been so long..."

I stood in front of the wash basin and looked at myself in the hazy mirror above it, thinking about the seventeen year old Anu I had said good bye to all those years ago.

When I was six years old, my father had changed jobs and we had moved to a new town. The school term had already begun when I was admitted in the first grade and I was walked to a class that was underway. I stood next to the teacher, who smiled at me, read the file the peon

handed her and said, "You can sit with Anaya." She pointed to a bench in the third row and the girl seated there looked up. She had dark brown hair, tied up in two thick plaits. That was the first thing I had noticed about Anaya. I am sure it was because I was unhappy about my own short hair.

The teacher asked me to sit next to Anaya because that was the only unoccupied seat in the class. But it was fate that ensured I found a place next to the girl who would go on to become my best friend. Over the next twelve years, we fought with each other umpteen times and patched up every time, promising never to fight with each other again. We told each other things that we could not even think of sharing with anyone else and covered up for each other in difficult situations. We were each other's confidants and secret keepers.

Both of us did well academically and decided to study engineering. Was it my choice rubbing off on her or vice versa? It didn't matter. But when it came to choosing the branch of engineering, we had different preferences. And so we had to part ways as we headed to two well-known engineering institutes in the country that were more than a thousand kilometres apart.

Anaya was leaving before me. The evening before she left, she came over to see me. We sat around the dining table, drinking milk shake and talking about the future – we were excited but also a little scared. We were sad to be parting ways, but confident that we would keep in touch no matter what, and always be each other's best friend.

At the front door, Anaya had suddenly hugged me tight and said, "I am going to miss you! Oh I wish we were going to the same place!"

I had hugged her back and said, "I know! But we'll write regularly, OK? And let's plan to meet every vacation."

We had indeed written each other regularly for the first semester, even talked to each other on phone a couple of times. But gradually studies, other activities at the institutes, and new acquaintances started occupying our days. We thought about meeting during vacations, but somehow couldn't manage that either.

After I completed engineering, I enrolled in one of the top institutes in the country for a masters' program. Anu landed a job with a multinational company. We had exchanged emails planning to meet in our hometown before the start of her job and my post-graduation. But we had to settle with a long phone conversation instead, since her company asked her to join earlier than planned.

Then life seemed to shift gears once again. In my second semester, I started seeing Ravi and spending time with him became a priority. At one point, I heard that Anu was in Singapore on work. Then a year later, I heard that she was married! I was surprised. And hurt that she had not invited me. When I went home that summer, I asked my mother about her and was taken aback to hear that she was married to Vishal Gulati. Vishal had been my class mate and for some time, a close friend. Then it had all gone wrong. Of all the people in the world, how had Anu

ended up marrying him?

I came back to the present when the door opened and Anu came in. She said, "A boy from the tea stall is asking if we want anything. I've ordered us tea. OK with you?"

I nodded and then said, "I'll be out in just a few minutes."

She smiled and said, "No problem. Take your time," before going back out.

When I stepped out into the hall, Anu was seated on her recliner and the small table beside it had two cups. She shook her head and said, "I can't believe it's really you! I never imagined that I would run into you like this, out of the blue."

"I know," I said, as I walked over to keep my things in my backpack.

She came over to me with the two cups and gave me one. She said, "I thought about getting in touch so many times. I wish I had! I have missed you so much."

I had missed her too and told her so. Then I looked at her properly and noticed the signs of time; she looked older and worldly wise. I am sure I did too. But she had dark circles around her eyes and a haggard look. We had come a long way from the unformed girls we had been sixteen years ago.

We sat close together as we drank our tea and slowly got comfortable talking to each other.

"First things first," she said, "Take my number and give me yours."

I hesitated for just a moment and then told her my number. She entered it into her cell phone and then after a few taps on her phone, held it in front of me, "My

daughter, Ketaki. She is eight." There was love and pride in her tone.

"She is pretty. Looks a lot like you," I said.

"Yes, doesn't she?" She was obviously pleased. "You have two boys right?"

"Yes," I said and showed her pictures of the imps. "Akshay is six and Mihir is three."

"He is so cute!" she exclaimed looking at one of Mihir's photos.

"So where are you coming from?" I asked changing tacks.

"My mother was not well. So I had gone over for a week."

Was that the reason behind her haggard look? I thought about her mother, remembering the innumerable times she had made tea for us in the middle of the night when I'd stayed over at Anu's under the pretext of studying together.

"What about you? Where are you going? Or coming from?" Anu asked.

I explained how I had to travel a lot in my job. "I am coming back from a three week long trip and really dying to get home!"

"Oh. Then who looks after the boys when you are away?"

"Ravi, my husband. He is very good at that," I said smiling.

"Really?" She said, sounding incredulous.

"Yes," I said and laughed a little. I was used to getting this kind of response from people.

"What does he do?"

Most people asked this when they heard that he took care of the kids in my absence. I smiled to myself and explained about his horticulture business.

“Wow!” she said sounding impressed.

Over the next couple of hours, we talked about many things but I didn’t ask about Vishal and she didn’t bring up his name.

When I walked with her to the platform after her train was announced, the station was quiet. She suddenly stopped, held my hand and said, “Nami, you know that I kept my distance because of your history with Vishal, right?”

“You know about that?” I was surprised.

“Yes.” She said and then looked away. “When he got to know that you and I were close, he told me everything. He said, he didn’t want to have secrets between us,” she looked at me and smiled. But the smile didn’t seem to reach her eyes. Then she went ahead, “I hope we can keep all that behind. That was so long ago. Both of you were so young and naive.”

She seemed really keen on rekindling our friendship and I had missed having a friend like her for too long. But there was a part of my brain protesting about what she had said. If Vishal had told her what had happened between us, how had she reconciled with it?

We walked quietly side by side. My mind travelled back in time again. I remembered the fun times I had spent with Vishal Gulati. He was my partner for most labs and practicals. We had been more than classmates. I’d always considered him a very good friend.

In our third year, one of our seniors invited us over to his father’s farm house for a party on a Friday evening. At that young age, a party at a farm house, with

our seniors, had seemed like a real grown up thing to do. I had spent considerable time deciding what to wear and playing with makeup. As my roommate and I got dressed together we were giggling nervously.

When we reached the farmhouse, the party was already underway. We could see a lot of our seniors and only a few of our classmates. We made our way over to the group of boys we knew well. Vishal handed me a glass and said, “Try this.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Only Limca,” he said laughing at my caution.

I took a sip. “It tastes different,” I said.

“It is only Limca. But if you don’t trust me...” He held out his hand as if to take the glass back.

“Of course I trust you!” I said and kept drinking from the glass though it didn’t taste like Limca to me.

We moved around after that. There was music blasting from a stereo and in the kitchen there was plenty of food to choose from. Then someone started dancing and soon more people joined in. Vishal approached me with another glass and said, “Here. It is coke,” he said, not giving me a chance to ask.

Taking the glass I took a sip. No, it didn’t taste like coke.

“There is just a tiny bit of rum in it,” he admitted, looking at my expression. “Are you scared to drink alcohol?” he asked challengingly. “Maybe you are not ready for it yet, kiddo!”

Calling me kiddo did the trick. “Of course I am not scared.” I said and took a gulp to prove my point. In a short time, I emptied that glass as well. But I was

feeling quite dizzy now.

"Are you drunk?" he asked me and laughed in my face.

"Of course not!" I wanted to behave like an adult so badly.

I am not sure if I drank any more after that. I don't remember much of the party beyond that point. The next thing I do remember is one of my worst memories. I was in a room upstairs; I don't know how I'd ended up there, and Vishal was pushing me down on the bed. He was saying something like, "Come on baby! I know you want this."

As my head cleared a little, I realized that he was fondling my breast. I pushed at his hand and said, "No". But he didn't pay any attention. He tried to push my dress up and I slapped his hand. "No! Stop it!" I shouted. He pressed his hand on my mouth and said, "There is no need to shout. No one will hear you. The door is closed."

That is when I really got scared and started fighting in earnest! I hit him hard and tried get off the bed. He held onto my sleeve and the sheer material tore. I started screaming and ran to the door. He got up and moved behind me but just then the door opened and the host of the party stood before me.

He called my roommate and gave me a jacket to wear over my dress. We left soon after that. On reaching our room in the hostel, my roommate put me on my bed and sat next to me.

"What happened?" She asked.

I was feeling embarrassed; I was wondering if what had happened was my fault.

"I don't want to talk about it," I told

her, and she nodded in understanding. She didn't push me and over the weekend she stayed around me but didn't ask about it again.

On Monday, I knew Vishal would come over to apologize and I didn't know how I would respond. I was preparing myself to make sure I handled it right. I did not want him to know how badly it had shaken me. But I definitely wanted to give a very clear message to him.

He came to talk to me outside the cafeteria towards late afternoon. Without giving me a chance to say anything, he launched a vicious verbal attack. He accused me of being a tease! He said that I had been leading him on, all along. I stood there completely stunned. After a few minutes, my roommate walked over and stood next to me and put her arm round my shoulder. Vishal went quiet and then just turned and walked away.

That party and what happened on Monday after that didn't just end my friendship with him; it shook me to the core. I went through a phase where I could not trust guys easily. I would wonder if I was giving the wrong signals through my behaviour.

A few of the guests at the party knew what had happened but I didn't discuss it with any of them. I didn't talk to anyone else either. Not even my mother. Not even after she asked me what was wrong when she noticed my expression change on hearing that Anu was married to Vishal. Ravi was the person I finally talked to about the whole nightmare. That was much later, after we got engaged.

I didn't make any effort to get in touch with Anu afterwards and neither did she.

We went on with our lives. I heard about her from time to time as she must have heard about me. But we didn't reach out to each other.

Her train entered the station announcing its arrival with a loud whistle. As she got on the train, I couldn't help myself and asked, "What did Vishal tell you?"

She looked at me and shook her head saying, "It does not matter anymore, Namita."

"Please tell me," I insisted.

She sighed and said, "He told me how you got drunk at a party and came onto him. How he had to fight you off." She turned to look at the signal then. So she didn't see my stunned, angry expression. As the train pulled out, Anu was saying, "Call me. We need to keep in touch now!"

I walked back slowly to the waiting room and sat down on the recliner,

contemplating what she'd said. Would she tell Vishal that she had met me? What would he do or say? Should I tell her the truth? Would she believe me?

I was not scared of the Vishals of the world anymore. I had been toughened by experience. My successful career as well as my strong and secure relationship with Ravi had made me confident. I knew I could handle Vishal if it came to that.

By the time I boarded my train, I had decided what I was going to do. I would make every effort to keep in touch with Anu and meet her as often as possible. I would not go out of my way to tell her about the incident but if she asked me, I would tell her the truth. If Vishal knew we were in touch, he might get worried. But that was his problem. It was not my burden to carry! I had lost my friend once thanks to Vishal. I was not going to a second time over.



We would love to hear from you! Send in your letters to readinghour@differsense.com.

Crossword solution

Across:

1 Worried 5 Zip up 8 Ire 9 Frisk 10 Audio 12 Rescind 14 Eve 15 Gut 16 Age 18 Ebb 20 Jab 22 Dab 24 Amnesty 27 Oxlip 29 Tiara 30 Lye 31 Shyly 32 Earshot

Down:

1 Wafer 2 Ruins 3 Ink 4 Die 5 Zealous 6 Padre 7 Proverb 11 One 13 Egg 16 Arduous 17 Panoply 19 But 21 Imp 23 Belly 25 Stash 26 Yeast 28 Bee 29 Tar

Smitha spends her life treating patients and teaching students, but she is willing to give all that up if someone gives her a job as a travel writer!

FICTION

The Horrific Tale Of The Jet-lagged Parrot

Smitha Bhat

We were one of those typical, often caricatured apartment complexes – full of stolidly middle class families, energetically involved in each other's lives, extremely right wing and righteous. Then how, how did we get drawn into a web of attempted homicide, adultery and gang wars?

It all started with the parrot.

On the top floor of our building, strategically placed to catch the sunrise over Besant Nagar beach, there lived a kindly, mildly eccentric old widower, Mr. Alagan.

"How are you, Uncle?" I asked him one morning as we strolled around the 4-foot wide patch of withered grass that we called our garden.

"Lonely, my dear, lonely after my dear wife left me. The house is so silent."

I wondered briefly if he was making a pass, but it was unlikely – he was ancient, toothless and completely benign.

"Why don't you get a pet for company? A parrot?" I suggested.

"Good idea! I'll think about it," he said, smiling.

Mea culpa.

"Radhika, I followed your advice and bought a parrot. I'm forever in your debt, my dear. What an intelligent companion I

have found! I discuss musical theory with him, and corporate law, and I swear he understands every word. Would you like to come up and meet him?"

"Sure."

We walked up to his messy flat.

"What have you called him?"

"Chellam."

"Hey, Chellam chweety, chweety, chay hello."

The parrot fixed me with a beady eye and looked terribly affronted.

"Don't use baby speak with him. It insults his intelligence," old Alagan whispered from behind me. I tried again.

"Good afternoon, Chellam. Very pleased to meet you. And how are you today, sir?"

The parrot grinned. "Stop chattering, woman, and get me some food."

"You're teaching him to be a chauvinist, Uncle," I said, as I left their house. I felt a warm halo beginning to form at the top of my head. This was good for at least twenty credit points with the accounting angel, the one that sits on a cloud and keeps track of everything we do.

It was probably a month or so later that Alagan dropped in to say good-bye.

"I'm off to spend 2 months with my son in Houston."

“What about your parrot?” my mother asked.

“I’m taking him along with me. He’s looking a little peaky of late and the change will do him good.”

It was the middle of summer by the time Alagan returned. He came loaded with gifts of chocolates, which my mother confiscated immediately.

“You know they make you erupt in pimples, and Usha’s son is visiting India next week. I want you to look your best. You can wear that new violet silk.” I fled to my room and found consolation with U2 and ‘If you wear that velvet dress’. Ah, what a voice! What a song!

Although my mother had an agenda for me, I had my own dreams, in pursuit of which I was taking a killer exam the following week. Fuelled by a cup of black coffee and a cigarette sneaked in the bathroom, I was staring at pages of boring figures and bar graphs when an unearthly shriek rent the air. I rushed to my balcony, terrified, certain I would see someone’s throat being slit. Other folks ran out too, all gazing wildly hither and thither, looking for what had to be some unimaginable violence. The shrieking continued, and it suddenly struck me that I recognised it. It was Kurt Cobain’s ‘Lithium’ being belted out with incredible energy, volume and tunelessness by... a parrot?

I returned to my room, bemused. This was the Vedanta loving, Bhaja Govindam singing Chellam. Ah well, people (and parrots) did change, I reflected, and hoped that this 2 a.m. enthusiasm to

burst into song did not become routine. Unfortunately, it did. It seemed that the parrot’s inspiration struck only past midnight.

“He hasn’t recovered from the jet lag,” Alagan explained. “He dozes the whole day.”

“Doesn’t it trouble you?”

“Oh, no,” he replied cheerfully. “I sleep when he does, and wake when he starts singing.”

Night after night, we were rudely woken by that damned insomniac bird bawling out its melodies at unearthly hours. Its repertoire was vast. Some days it chose to sing sentimental love ballads in a syrupy monotone. On other days, it was more aggressive and screeched ‘Stairway to Heaven’ with terrible dissonance.

This went on for another week, and our tempers, already stretched thin by the unrelenting heat, were further worn by the lack of sleep, the assault on our ears and the utter – how shall I put it – ‘musiclessness’ of Chellam’s renditions.

An emergency building society meet was called to discuss the issue.

“Bad things are happening in the building,” said the society chairperson, Palaniappan. “Decent citizens, deprived of their rightful sleep, are becoming corrupted by that devil in parrot’s shape.”

“Corrupted? What does he mean?” I whispered to Kavita, my best friend.

“I believe Rajasekhar is spending the nights in Ranjani’s house,” she whispered back.

“Oh, the louse! Where is his wife?”

“Visiting her parents. And that’s not all, the captain is up to some hanky panky

with the English lecturer.”

“Tell me more,” I whispered, thrilled at all these goings on in our hitherto boring complex.

“Calling the meeting to order,” Palaniappan snapped, glaring at us. “There have been serious complaints from various members. Mr. Jagannathan?”

“My wife is seven months pregnant, and we went for an ultra sound scan yesterday. The sonologist said that the baby was making unseemly gestures at him. I blame it all on the devil’s music that we are forced to hear every night.”

“True, true. And my son is having nightmares,” said Raghavan.

“Well, at least he is sleeping. My daughter has been sleepless for a week,” Mrs. Mala Sharma shouted.

“That’s probably because she is plotting to ensnare my son,” hissed Mrs. Shanti Raghavan.

“Now, now, Mrs Shanti, that is probably unfair.” This from the very quiet Mr. Ramamurthy.

“Don’t you say anything to me! I saw you pinching the flower vendor’s... well, cheeks yesterday.”

“WHAT?” screamed Mrs. Ramamurthy.

The level of conversation rapidly deteriorated to levels rarely heard even in the less civilised kindergartens in the city.

Palaniappan banged his fist on the table. “This meeting is adjourned with a resolution to do something about the parrot.”

Things got worse rapidly. My brief periods of sleep were ruined by unbelievably graphic dreams of taking the parrot’s spindly throat in my hand and slowly squeezing, until it became

silent. Now, I have nothing against our feathered friends per se, and I happen to be a rock fan myself. Why, I possess the complete collection of Def Leppard, cover versions included. But to have a jet-lagged parrot carol its interpretation of ‘Animal’ at 2 a.m. was enough to rouse the gentlest soul to protest.

I was on my way to college one morning when I spotted Captain Mahesh creeping furtively along the sixth floor corridor. The captain is a retired navy guy, the epitome of dignity and chivalry, and I knew something was very wrong when I saw him sidling along like an embarrassed crab.

“Captain!” I called. “Where are you headed?”

He whirled around and glared at me with a malevolence born of sleep deprivation. I recoiled when I saw the wicked knife he tried to hide from me.

“May I ask what you are up to?”

He looked around with a hunted expression. “I’m off to finish off that *** bird. I haven’t slept for thirteen days. I fear I am losing my mind.”

“Captain, I am sure you don’t mean that. There must be a law about pet homicide and I’m sure we don’t want you arrested. Why, you are the only gentleman in this building. We can’t afford to lose you! You go on home, I’ll take care of this, I promise.”

I attempted a flirtatious look, and batted my eyelashes at him. He seemed impressed.

“Ok, I’ll return home, but only because you are telling me to, my dear young woman.”

We spent a few more minutes giving

each other meaningful glances and then returned to our respective lairs.

Time passed and things got worse with Chellam mauling a new song every night. One night, however, matters came to a head when the parrot sang ‘Fields of gold’. ‘Fields of gold’ that my very first boyfriend crooned to me over Kumbakonam degree coffee. ‘Fields of gold’, which ensured I remained unentangled for a long, long time because I ‘was saving myself for Sting’. Was nothing sacred?

I resolved to take action against the parrot, and fast.

I wondered how to solve the problem. We were desperate for a solution, but short of physically throwing Mr Alagan and his parrot off the terrace, I couldn’t really think of anything else. Unless... oh yes. Anbarasi mami! Why hadn’t I thought about her before?

The only time I had approached this lady was in the 12th grade, when I had been attacked by a virulent form of infatuation for my lanky, richly pimpled maths professor. A friend recommended Anbarasi, and I shelled out a year’s savings to this obese, oily woman, who operated from a small cart next to the last bonda stall on the marina. She gave me an opaque white solution, which she asked me to feed to my beloved. It would ensure his undying adoration for me, she claimed. I’m sure it would have worked, but he suffered such a bad attack of dysentery after drinking the potion diluted in Limca that he never returned to teach. Anyway, it was worth a try.

A little doubtfully, I took the cash I had

been saving for a Roland keyboard and made my way to the marina. There was Anbarasi, fatter, and if possible, oilier than ever. I explained the situation to her.

“Five hundred rupees,” she said. I winced, but handed the cash over. She gave me a glistening green liquid.

“It is called Satvam. It will ensure that your parrot starts behaving himself.”

Now, it only remained to convince Alagan to feed this to his parrot.

I entered his flat, and was rewarded by the sight of the parrot, dozing, a miniature fan blowing a cool breeze on its sleeping form and ruffling its feathers.

“Sit down, Radhika, sit down.” I wedged my abundance into the tiny chair normally occupied by the Alagan posterior. I could feel the circulation to my lower limbs being cut off, but bigger issues than personal comfort were at stake here.

“Uncle, I so miss the Chellam of old. He was such a cultured little bird, singing devotional songs. What corrupted him?”

“I don’t think he is corrupted. One has to move with the times,” said Alagan.

He then attempted the twist, singing ‘We are the Champions’ in double time. I gazed up at him, spellbound by the most revolting spectacle I had ever seen in my whole life. Fortunately, Alagan caught sight of himself in the mirror.

“My God, do I look like that?”

“Unfortunately, yes, Uncle. And Chellam’s singing is the verbal equivalent of what you just saw.”

“But what do I do? How do I make him revert to his old, God-fearing ways?”

“I can help. Just make him drink this.”

I proffered the Satvam.

"It won't harm him, will it? Promise me nothing will happen to my Chellam," he murmured brokenly.

"Come on, Uncle. Don't you trust me?"

He prodded the parrot awake, and while it was gazing around sleepily, getting its bearings, he forced the Satvam down its throat.

I'm happy to say that this story had a happy conclusion. The parrot restricted itself to singing bhajans in the afternoon, Rajasekhar returned to his wife and the Captain gave up ideas of homicide.

I bought my keyboard, and am now practicing at top volume every single waking moment.

I am considered a heroine by everyone in our building.

Why, just 5 minutes ago, Rajasekhar from downstairs came up with a glass of some magical concoction which he assured me will make my fingers even more nimble on the keyboard. There it stands on my table, gleaming in the evening light, with just one message in its magenta depths – "Drink me..."



Aman is a poet and writer from Thane. He enjoys making short-films, doing stand-up and dabbling in music. He has published his short stories and poems in various literary journals.

POETRY

True Connection

Aman Chougale

When my ego trips
I listen to a song
or read a book
that way
it's no longer
a one man party.



ESSAY

The Argumentative Indian

Manjushree Hegde

Indians, it seems, are argumentative. In the words of a 19th-century Bengali poet, Ram Mohan Roy,

*"Just consider how terrible the day of your death
will be.
Others will go on speaking, and you will not be able
to argue back."*

Thus we are told that the real hardship of death would be our frustrating inability to argue. Although it is a humorous note, it is not untrue; Indian intellectual tradition is, in fact, a stock of debates and arguments, and all classical Indian texts contain within their pages elaborate expositions and discussions among the different schools of thought. The Vedas may be full of hymns and religious invocations, but they also tell stories, speculate about the world and – true to argumentative propensity – ask difficult questions. A basic doubt concerns the very creation of the world: did someone make it, was it a spontaneous emergence, and is there a God who knows what really happened? The Rgveda goes on to express radical doubts on these issues: "Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? ... perhaps it

Manjushree lives in Bangalore and travels around India in search of gurus who will advance her Sankrit knowledge.

formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know."

Such doubts recur again and again in India's long argumentative history, along with a great many other questions, and they survive side by side with intense religious beliefs and deeply respectful faith and devotion.

Ancient Indian tradition saw and recognized the necessity of healthy skepticism, and encouraged it, for a fact; the study of sacred books was regarded neither as necessary nor sufficient. While the need for rituals was acknowledged, tradition also warned us of limitations – there were no one-size-fits-all straitjackets. Adi Sankaracharya wrote,

अविज्ञाते परे तत्त्वे शास्त्राधीतिस्तु निष्फला।
विज्ञातेऽपि परे तत्त्वे शास्त्राधीतिस्तु निष्फला॥

*"The study of śāstra is useless when the highest
truth is unknown.
The study of the śāstra is useless when the highest
truth is known!"*

Even the Gīta does not hesitate to talk
यामिमां पुष्पितां वाचं प्रवदन्त्यविपश्चितः ।
वेदवादरताः पार्थ नान्यदस्तीति वादिनः ॥

about the fallibility of the Veda:

*"Only the ignorant speak in flowery tongues,
extolling the Vedas, claiming,
There is nothing deeper than this."*

Even lesser known sects like the Cārvakas have lambasted the ritualistic methods of the Veda with impunity.

पशुश्चेन्निहतः स्वर्गं ज्योतिष्टोमे गमिष्यति ।
स्वपिता यजमानेन तत्र कस्मात् न हिंस्यते ॥
त्रयो वेदस्य कर्तारो भण्ड-धूर्त-निशाचराः ।
जर्भरी-तुर्फरीत्यादि पण्डितानां वचः स्मृतम् ॥

*"If the animal killed in the Jyotistoma sacrifice goes
to heaven,*

*Why does the sacrificer not offer his own father?"
The authors of the Vedas were buffoons, knaves,
and demons.*

*Just look at the nonsensical words of their pandits
'jarbhārī', 'turphārī'!"*

*(The two strange sounding words are
from the Rg-samhita).*

Quite a wry sense of humor, they had, these Cārvakas. And you can rest assured nobody besieged them demanding an unconditional apology. Their method was very much regarded a valid path of philosophical enquiry. This is a very refreshing freedom indeed – to be told to question, to use the power of discrimination, and to distil wisdom from experience.

In order to discuss the veritable feast of viewpoints in ancient India, debating circles (pariśads) and congresses would be organized frequently across the state, and representative thinkers of the different schools would be invited to meet and

exchange their views. One of the earliest accounts that we find of such a congress is in the Brhadāranyakopaniṣad: King Janaka of Videha performed an aśvamedha-sacrifice, to which he invited all the scholars of the Kuru Panchala country. A great tournament of debate was conducted on the occasion, and in it, Yājñavalkya came out as the best scholar. In order to win, he had to face perplexing questions from seven great scholars of the time, including a woman, Gārgī Vācaknavī. Gārgī told him, "As a heroic youth bends his unbent bow and takes two deadly arrows in hand, I have armed myself against thee with two questions, which solve for me." Yājñavalkya gave befitting answers to her questions, and in the end, she declared before the great gathering, "Venerable men, you would do well to bow before this lad. No one, I believe, can defeat him in any argument concerning Atman."

In a verbal duel, in order for the parties to communicate well their stand, a set of rules had to be established to recognize correct and incorrect arguments, and to fulfill this requirement, a well-defined system of Logic came to be.

Logic is a scientific inquiry into what constitutes a true debate. Etymologically, the word 'logic' is connected with the Greek word 'logos', which denotes both 'thought', and 'word', or 'discourse'. In Sanskrit, it is rendered as nyāya, and the study of Logic is called nyāya-śāstra. Of the extant works on nyāya-śāstra, the oldest is Akṣhapāda Gotama's nyāya-sutrās, dated to about 350 B.C. With 532 aphorisms, Gotama's is an erudite,

sophisticated work that is considered as a standard to this date.

For Gotama, dialogues were to be conducted not for self-expression, for persuasion or for winning, but for a 'seeing together', for a 'common search for truth'. But in reality, arguments may sharpen the wits, but rarely do they strengthen understanding, clear perspicacity, or improve the heart. This is illustrated by a story in the Mahābhārata.

Once, a family brought the body of their young son to a cremation ground. The boy, the light of their lives, had barely reached his youth before he'd passed away. As they grieved their loss, a vulture, a long-time resident of the cremation ground, walked up to them and said, "O Men, learn that the whole world goes through joys and sorrows in turn. Union and bereavement follow each other. [Therefore, do not grieve]. It is evening, and the sun is setting. Return to your homes safely before dusk; your bond with your son has ended."

Indeed, what can one do when faced with the most fundamental of all sorrows, that of the end of existence itself? The family prepared to return. All of a sudden, a jackal appeared out of a burrow. "How can you so cruelly abandon this young boy, throwing away all your affection? Just some time ago, his very babblings were your greatest boon, and now, you leave without the slightest care?"

Now, the jackal's words are very profound. How quickly the family is ready to abandon their darling child! Possibly one of the most inscrutable of human capacities is the ability to move

on. No matter how strong the bond, no matter how intertwined the past, no matter how rosy the commonly-dreamt future – in the face of loss, the human spirit finds a way to cope.

On hearing the jackal's words, the family is overrun with grief and comes back to sit beside the boy's corpse. The vulture tells them very sharply, "This corpse has become one with the five elements. It is empty of life, why do you grieve for it, you fools? Time is the ruler of all, and levels all with an equal eye." The jackal is no less knowledgeable. It shoots back: "Only when exertion meets destiny is the right fruit produced. One must always be hopeful – what is the point of despondency? You can succeed only by effort, you hard-hearted fools, where will you go from here?"

The verbal duel continues for about a hundred verses, touching the depths of philosophy. It is only then that the genius of Vyāsa drops the bomb:

"The vulture and the jackal were both hungry and arguing with their own selfish ends in mind. They knew the śāstras, and spoke beautifully, making the family go hither and thither."

The vulture couldn't see at night, and so was asking the family to leave quickly, so that it could eat up the corpse. The jackal on the other hand could see well at night, but couldn't fight the vulture during the day. So it was asking the family to stay till sundown, so that afterward it could peacefully eat the body all by itself. At every stage of the conversation, the vulture and jackal were both perfectly logically consistent, and made very well-supported arguments. Vyāsa thus laid

bare the two-faced nature of political argument.

In order to recognize fallacious logic and arguments in a verbal duel, Gotama set forth a rigorous theory in his work which described in detail a procedure of reasoning based on a five-part method of dialogic presentation. He enunciated sixteen categories of logic, epistemology and argumentation: valid means of cognition (*pramāṇa*), the knowable (*prameya*), doubt (*samśaya*), purpose (*prayojana*), example (*dr̥ṣṭānta*), established doctrine (*siddhānta*), members of syllogism (*avayava*), counterfactual conditional (*tarka*), ascertainment (*nirṇaya*), controversy (*vāda*), wrangling (*jalpa*), destructive dialect (*vitanda*), fallacies of syllogism (*hetvābhāsa*), quibbling (*chala*), futile argument (*jāti*), and grounds of defeat (*nigrahasthāna*).

Almost in parallel in Greece, Aristotle set forth his theory of Logic in a series of essays, later compiled into one book, *Organon*. For Aristotle, the goal of argument was to persuade the audience of the validity of one's ideas. He said that one could employ three means of persuasion to defend one's stand – *Ethos* (persuasion by demonstration of the ethical/moral appeal of the stand), *Pathos* (persuasion by appealing to the audience's emotions), and *Logic* (persuasion by reasoned arguments).

Logic, therefore, in the Indian context, evolved to “meet one another, discuss and understand your minds” (*Rg Veda*

X.191.2), while in the West, it was rather an aid to defend one's stand. But in Andre Maurois' words, “the difficult part in an argument is not to defend one's opinion, but rather to know it.”

After Gotama, the school of logicians continued to grow for centuries – If *Vātsyāyana* reigned as the greatest *nyāyikā* of the 4th century C.E. his genius was surpassed by *Uddyotakara* of 6th century C.E., *Vācaspati Mishra* (841 C.E.), *Jayantabhatta* (9th century C.E.), *Udayanācārya* (10th century C.E.), followed by giants like *Gangesopadhyaya* and *Vasudeva Sarvaabhauma* (15th 16th century C.E.).

Only in the latter half of the seventeenth century did the school begin to stagnate – a reflection of the wounds left by foreign invasion – and the then *nyāya* scholars did all they could to simply continue the tradition. Now, it has, without doubt, come to a standstill, and the scholars today concern themselves only with the study of extant works.

Verily, India must go back to her golden age. But the golden age that she must go back to, is not one of flying machines, test tube babies and nuclear technology. It's really this spirit of openness and free thought that we need to bring back. That spirit is the real motivating force behind *Sanātana Dharma* and the rest, as *Śankara* would put it –

सन्त्यस्मिन्सहकारिणः

is only peripheral.



last page

arukum

Where eating out is concerned, there are two kinds of people. Those who swear by an all-you-can-eat buffet spread, and those who sneer at it, labeling the former as people who value ‘quantity over quality’.

Before you slot me into the wrong category, let me state quite clearly that I belong to the first category. I love buffet spreads, as long as they have manageable variety. Which means not so many dishes that there’s no way you could try them all. And that is what the attraction is for me – the tasting of many dishes, since I am not really a large eater. Medium large buffets also work for me, since I am vegetarian by choice, and thus must rule out about half the dishes on offer.

Buffets are also the one place where I bend my rule of not combining cuisines. I can never walk into a restaurant which serves Indian / Chinese / Continental without a shudder, just as I could never follow up pasta with curd-rice. But at buffets, one accommodates. Thus have I broken fast sometimes with Baked Beans, Toast, Omelette, Puri-Sabzi and Medu Vada followed by Filter Coffee!

This need for variety used to raise questions at home when we were newly married. The wife would observe me sparing dobs and dabs of various items and spiriting them away in small

containers to the fridge and say, “Why are you leaving so little of this? Why don’t you finish it now?” To which I would truthfully say, “Because a) I have had enough and this would be just a bit too much, and b) I want to have it with my next meal.”

My musing on this topic has also led me to believe that there are two kinds of people. Those, who when they like something, overextend themselves and try and polish off as much as they can, and then those who keep a bit aside – for later. No prizes for guessing where I belong.

Which is also the reason I like the concept of doggy bags. (Not that one would feed a pet leftovers from dining out in a restaurant in India, for all that that might have been the original intent of a doggy bag). While eating out, if I like something, I end up monitoring its level in the serving bowl with keen eyes. Because there’s a fine line between the point at which you can ask for the dish to be ‘parcelled’ and that where you would be looked at askance. In the second situation of course, you would have to settle for eating as much as you can right then.

If you’re turning up your nose at these unsophisticated ways, let me ask you what your preferences are, in dining. In fact, preferences regarding life in general... do you prefer an appreciation of a wide variety of things and experiences, or driven expertise in one chosen area? Maybe we can chat about this over a (buffet) meal sometime!



Reading Hour

short fiction . poetry . essays

make it a habit



Pick up your copy today!

Or subscribe at readinghour.in

Digital versions available on magzter.com

All print issues available on dogearsetc.com